

for immediate release

Largest increase in school closings since the 90's points to need for renewed funding formula

Toronto (November 9, 2009) – More school boards across the province are exploring the option of closing schools in the face of enrolment declines and budget pressures, according to a new report released today by People for Education. Research from People for Education shows that there are 172 schools slated or recommended to close in Ontario between 2009 and 2012, and a further 163 under review for possible closing.

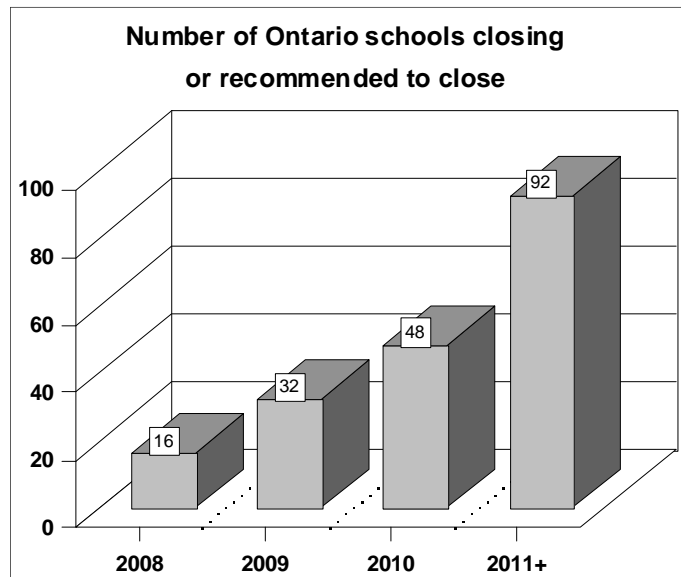
“Though there are times when closing a school is the right choice, there are many other cases where schools could be kept viable by changes in both funding and policy,” says Annie Kidder, Executive Director of People for Education, an independent, parent-led organization. “We have to start looking at the potential in our schools to act as centres of integrated services for families and children, and we have to fund them accordingly.”

Data in report reveals provincial problem

The report shows that school closings will increase every year for at least the next three years.

Among the other findings:

- Across the province, there are 172 schools slated to close or recommended for closing over the next 3 to 4 years.
- A further 163 schools are currently undergoing Accommodation Reviews for possible closing.
- In 8 of Ontario's 72 boards, enrolment has declined by more than 20% since 2002. In Superior Greenstone DSB, for example, enrolment has declined by 39%.
- Ontario will have 140,000 fewer students in 2012 than it had in 2002.
- The average elementary school now has 310 students, compared to an average of 365 in 1997/98.
- There are 812 students in an average secondary school, compared to a high of 947 students per school in 2002/03.



Funding formula based on 1997 enrolments

Average school sizes have declined by over 14% since 1997 when the provincial funding formula for education was developed, but the formula has not kept pace with the changing sizes of schools.

When it was developed in 1997, the formula was, for the most part, related to average school sizes as they existed then. Boards were, and continue to be, provided with funding for staff based both on numbers of students and on a set allowance of square footage per student.

A number of changes have been made to the formula over the last decade, but many of the basic “per pupil” allocations remain the same. Principals and secretaries are now funded mainly on a “per school” basis, but funding for most other staff continues to be based on numbers of students. For example, boards receive funding for one elementary teacher-librarian for every 769 students, one support staff for every 578 elementary students etc.

Funding for building maintenance and operations is also connected to enrolment. Boards are funded based on maintenance costs per square foot, but the funding formula lays out a prescribed number of square feet per student. In boards where they have more “square feet” than their prescribed allocation, maintenance of the so-called “empty space” is unfunded. Maintenance of space not recognized as classrooms is also unfunded. Thus a Design and Technology room, a computer lab, a community kitchen or a parents’ meeting room may also appear as “empty space” on a board’s books—exacerbating the funding issue.

Group recommends changes to funding and policy

The Ministry of Education has promised to review Ontario’s Education Funding Formula in 2010. Declining enrolment provides an opportunity not only to update per pupil allocations in the formula, but also to “re-think” the use of school buildings.

People for Education recommends:

- Moving forward with all aspects of *With Our Best Futures in Mind*, the report on early learning, to provide support for schools to act as “one stop shops” providing coordinated and integrated services for families, children and youth.
- Establishing a provincial integration framework for all programs and services for families, children and youth. The framework, with the Ministry of Education acting as the “leader among leaders,” should include not only a funding mechanism, but also a range of outcome measures for student success, student and community engagement, community health, integration of services and equity of outcomes.
- Before the review of funding in 2010, the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with Ministries such as Children and Youth Services, Health, Health Promotion and Municipal Affairs should:
 - examine research on optimal school size;
 - investigate the impact of a community hub model on things like overall health promotion, neighbourhood viability, youth violence and poverty reduction; and
 - develop policy and funding to support and promote integrated planning and schools as community hubs.

The full report is available on the People for Education website at www.peopleforeducation.com

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