



Mark Fisher, Director of Education and Secretary

2020 November 19

The Honourable Stephen Lecce  
Minister of Education  
438 University Avenue, 5th Floor  
Toronto, Ontario M7A 2A5

Dear Minister Lecce,

As Chair of the Thames Valley District School Board, as well as the Board's Rural Education Task Force, I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to serve in this leadership role. The Task Force is a unique committee established by our Trustees in 2019, with membership comprised of Thames Valley Trustees, municipal leaders and education partners. The Task Force Co-Chair is Marcus Ryan, Oxford County Councillor and Mayor of Zorra Township.

We believe this shared responsibility demonstrates the joint commitment of our Trustees and municipal leaders as partners in realizing the best for our rural schools and communities. Additionally, we are very proud of this unique partnership and collaboration – likely a first in Ontario.

The mandate of the Task Force is to co-create a rural education strategy for Thames Valley through collaboration across our diverse rural, suburban and growing urban school district.

At the October 2020 Board meeting, Trustees adopted the following motion:

That the Board of Trustees advocate for the following and invite the Rural Education Task Force municipal members to advocate similarly:

- Maintaining and enhancing the Rural and Northern Education Fund (RNEF) funding model for rural and northern schools.
- Maintaining the moratorium on school consolidations and closures for the schools that qualify/identified for the Rural and Northern Education Fund, in accordance with the Ministry of Education Draft Public Accommodation Guidelines.
- Strengthening of integrated local planning at the community level and to promote local planning conversations among school boards, municipalities and other relevant local partners to ensure ongoing communication and notification regarding possible school consolidations, closures, additions or new builds.
- Provincial policies for capacity (capital) planning and pupil accommodation reviews that formally recognize the importance and value to the community of rural and single school community schools.

Schools in Ontario's rural communities play a significant role in the lives of our students' families and community beyond providing education. Ontario schools in rural communities directly contribute to; promoting economic benefits such as student employment, co-op learning, skilled trades, agriculture, manufacturing, and

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*We build each student's tomorrow, every day.*

further community engagement (service/social clubs), student and community success, engagement and well-being (education and growth), fostering a sense of belonging, trust, safety and a sense of identity, community hub offering amenities for families (health care, food security, recreation and leisure, library, mental health supports).

Across Ontario, shifting enrollment and demographics have resulted in student accommodation challenges in urban, suburban and rural settings. One size does not fit all, nor does one solution fit all communities.

### **Rural and Northern Education Fund (RNEF)**

Funding directed to rural and northern schools is key to their ongoing success and vitality. We believe key areas of the GSNs should be reviewed for redundancies or unspent funds that could be reinvested into the RNEF with the goal of a revenue neutral solution to further enhance rural schools.

### **School Closure Moratorium**

Since June 2017, the moratorium on all school closures remains in place, and we appreciate your government's current commitment to uphold the moratorium until the review of the provincial guidelines for Pupil Accommodation Reviews( PAR) guidelines has been completed including the finalization of standardized templates.

Members of the Task Force recognize the development of provincial Pupil Accommodation Review guidelines as a collaborative process that needs to balance student well-being with the impacts of school closures on rural, Northern and single school communities.

The Board is asking for the moratorium to remain in place for schools that qualify for the Rural and Northern Education Fund. Through the PAR Guidelines (April 2018), schools identified for RNEF support must be given extra consideration when contemplated in a Pupil Accommodation Review. In the draft PAR guidelines, an economic impact assessment template has yet to be designed.

Thus we are suggesting that, while this template is being developed, the moratorium be lifted for the schools that do not qualify for RNEF support. Further, we ask you to join us to build on the expertise and uniqueness of the Task Force by:

- **Collaborating in the development of the standardized templates to determine the economic impact of rural schools in communities identified for RNEF support.**

### **Strengthening Integrated Local Planning**

Based on our leadership experiences in local communities, we believe an integrated local planning approach should be grounded in:

- Communication and collaborative planning,
- Fostering local engagement and buy-in,
- Meaningful participation and implementation, and
- Informed and engaged communities.

Local planning policy must embrace overarching principles of respect, and acknowledge the relationships and interconnectedness of students, their families, and the dual role of school Boards and municipalities as local decision makers.

School boards and municipalities have shared responsibilities and should plan and build communities together.

**Provincial Policies: Capital Planning and Student Accommodations**

Provincial policy is not enough to ensure success. Consequently, success builds on:

- Respecting the local knowledge, experiences and expertise that honours the diversity of rural Ontario,
- Bridging the gap and breaking down silos that inhibit collaboration,
- Ensuring policy flexibility that incentivizes adaptation and innovation, and
- Promoting localized approaches that emphasize schools as a pathway to local employment.

This will require a paradigm shift for policy makers to see rural schools and communities as an asset to Ontario, as your government has demonstrated.

Policies that allow for local determination of optimal school size benefits all by recognizing the importance of a school's geographic setting in supporting student success and well-being.

In closing, by working together our collective contributions will ensure all students in Ontario's education system will have local community schools that deliver exceptional education programs and services and support a vision for thriving rural communities.

We look forward to hearing from you about how we can assist in shaping greater outcomes through provincial policies for the rural communities we collectively serve.

Sincerely,



Arlene Morell, Chair  
Thames Valley District School Board

cc M. McNaughton, MPP Lambton-Kent-Middlesex  
J. Yurek, MPP Elgin-Middlesex-London  
E. Hardeman, MPP Oxford  
M. Fisher, Director of Education  
Trustees  
M. Ryan, Municipal Representative of Oxford County  
S. Martyn, Municipal Representative of Elgin County  
A. Cornelissen, Municipal Representative of Middlesex County