



February 21, 2017

To Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board,

OFA represents the interests of 36,000 farm families and their farm businesses across Ontario, and more than 160,000 people that work on farms to support Ontario agriculture. We also speak indirectly for the thousands of Ontarians who live and work in rural Ontario supplying farm inputs and processing and distributing our agricultural products. We are an advocacy organization – working to ensure farm families have a sustainable future in a viable business environment.

This means we work on issues that directly affecting farmers, and also issues that affect our rural communities.

The Ontario Federation of Agriculture is very concerned with the status of our communities – the departure of our youth and families to opportunities in urban Ontario is hurting rural Ontario and presents us all with many challenges. We are working to reverse this trend, but a necessary precondition for bringing families to revitalize our communities and to support the families that form our communities is a solid school system.

However, we believe that we can revitalize our communities and, in turn, fill our schools by maintaining rural schools.

Schools are an important part of every community. But in rural Ontario, schools play a very big role. They aren't just a place for learning.

School buildings are used for community social events, local sports activities, and by service and community groups.

When you close a rural school, you close it off for the entire community, not just the students.

Susan MacKenzie, spokesperson for the Ontario Alliance Against School Closures was recently quoted saying: 'We're paying a steep price to cuts in education. It is time to see beyond the boundaries of Toronto and the GTA.'

The Alliance and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) have both called for additional analysis of the social and economic impact of closing rural schools. We need to account for the full impact and "cost" on students and the entire community when a school closes.

When a rural school closes:

Students will have to travel outside their communities, on long bus rides, to go to larger schools in urban areas. This is a cost.

The extra time spent on buses means students may not be able to be part of after school activities, and may not be able to have part-time jobs or take on farm chores. This represents costs.

Long bus rides mean our children get home late to try to complete homework on unreliable internet. This is a cost to student success.

All schools depend on volunteers, and when you bus students into urban centres, you will have lost the opportunities for local volunteers to support their community.

OFA believes the review process used to determine rural schools closures is flawed. We agree with the Alliance and Association of Ontario Municipalities that the Accommodation Review Committee process, and resulting guidelines, need to be redone. We also believe the funding formula must be reviewed.

We recognize budgets are tight – so what if we think differently in the short term? What if school buses pick up students in towns and bring them to rural schools. The routes would be much shorter and our new rural students would realize a once in a lifetime experience!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bruce Buttar".

Bruce Buttar
Zone 12 Director
Ontario Federation of Agriculture