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Ministry of Education

McGuinty government calls for moratorium on school closures

TORONTO, Dec. 12 /CNW/ - In keeping with the McGuinty government's commitment to deliver positive change, Education Minister Gerard Kennedy today called on all Ontario school boards to place a moratorium on school closures until after September 2004.

"Our goal is to ensure Ontario students get the best schools and the best education possible. That's why we're going to take the time to review and revise provincial guidelines to help Boards make the best possible school closure and building planning decisions," says Kennedy. "We believe our goal of making public education the best education and improving student performance can best be met if we treat our schools as learning communities, rather than just bricks and mortar."

Kennedy notes that in some cases boards may choose to proceed with closures where there is widespread consensus within the school community, for example where a new replacement school is being built.

Under provincial legislation, the decision to close schools is made by local school boards. However, boards are required to have school-closure policies based on provincial guidelines, and these are in the process of being revised by the new government. In addition, many of the provincial funding policies that influence board decisions on the viability of schools under their control will be reviewed.

A letter from Kennedy, delivered to all Ontario school boards today, indicates that in future, boards will be asked specifically to assess the education and community value of the schools being considered for closure, with special consideration for rural schools.

"Because of the current funding formula, short-term financial considerations have played too large a role in decisions to close schools. In fact, some of the most successful schools in the province in terms of literacy and numeracy testing results have closed," says Kennedy. "The decision to shut down any school should only be part of a long range plan that takes into account the improvements that the McGuinty government plans to make to Ontario public education to the benefit of all students."

The McGuinty Government has committed to making Ontario's public education the best education and to improving outcomes for students in literacy and numeracy. Within four years 75 per cent of students will meet or exceed the provincial standard on province wide tests.

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For further information: Media Contacts: Jill Fairbrother, Minister's Office, (416) 325-2683, (416) 788-0539 (cell); Dave Ross, Communications Branch, (416) 325-2709; Public Inquiries: (416) 325-2929 or 1-800-387-5514,

MEMORANDUM TO: Directors of Education

**FROM: Suzanne Herbert
Deputy Minister of Education**

DATE: December 12, 2003

SUBJECT: Moratorium on School Closures

Earlier today the Minister of Education wrote to school board chairs to ask them to defer making any decisions to close schools for the remainder of this school year. A copy of the Minister's letter is attached.

The Minister's request applies only to school closure decisions being considered this school year. There is no requirement that boards re-visit decisions that have already been taken, though of course, boards may do so if they wish.

The Minister also indicated that the Government believes that student and community needs, not simply financial considerations, should be factors influencing school closure decisions. Closure decisions should be part of a long-range plan that reflects improvements that the Government plans to make to benefit students.

He has asked Ministry staff to review the school closure guidelines to ensure that they include student and program needs as well as the community value of schools. The review will also examine the need for special processes to assess school closures in rural areas. Ministry staff will also be reviewing the components of the funding model that may impact school closure decisions in future years.

As I am sure you are aware, the Government has made several commitments that will impact long-range planning. They include:

- A cap of 20 pupils in primary classes;
- The implementation of a Best Start child care program that includes eligibility for day care space in schools;
- Making schools hubs for community activity; and
- Increasing the school leaving age from 16 to 18.

Ministry staff will consult with our education partners as we review the provincial school closure guidelines and the relevant components of the funding model. We look forward to working with you on this important activity.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'SH', is positioned above the typed name.

Suzanne Herbert
Deputy Minister

Attachment

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December 12, 2003

Ms. Jan Hunter
Chair
Thames Valley District School Board
Box 5888, 1250 Dundas St. E.
London, Ontario
N6A 5L1

Received
DEC 12 2003
Office of the Chairperson

Dear Ms. Hunter,

Congratulations to you on both your successful election and your selection as Board Chair. As Minister, I look forward to working with you in a new era of education co-operation and improvement in Ontario.

I am writing today to convey my request for a moratorium on school closings by your board until after September 2004. The measure is needed to permit your students to receive the full benefits of the improvements for Ontario education planned by the McGuinty government.

What this province-wide moratorium would mean is that all schools that are under consideration for closure today would remain open in the next school year. The only exceptions would be where there is already widespread agreement among the affected school community.

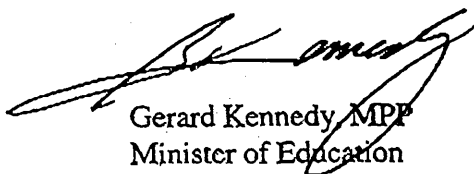
In the interim, the ministry will be revising the provincial guidelines for school closing procedures to include among other things, consideration for the education and community value of schools, with special processes for rural areas. As well, we will be reviewing all the relevant elements of the funding formula that can impact closing decisions together with the timetable for changes.

I know you appreciate that the decision to close a school, and in many cases to shut down a school community, is a serious one that needs to be made with the best long-term perspective. I want to confirm to you that the McGuinty government remains firmly committed to implementing our Excellence for All plan for education over the next four years, including several important aspects that directly impact school space:

- A cap of 20 students in primary classes
- Begin to implement the Best Start child care program that includes eligibility for daycare space in schools once again
- Making schools hubs for community activity
- Increasing the school leaving age from 16 to 18.

I understand that we will need to work closely together to successfully carry out initiatives on behalf of students. The moratorium is a first step to permit us to do that. Your cooperation and that of your fellow trustees and staff in this matter is greatly appreciated.

Yours sincerely,



Gerard Kennedy, MPP
Minister of Education