

Communities concerned about schools

By Jim Eadie

A Hastings Prince Edward District School Board discussion paper suggesting the closure of three rural schools in North Hastings over a 10-year span, and busing the children to Bancroft or Bird's Creek, has got many parents chewing their fingernails again. But instead of anger, the prevailing emotion this time around seems to be grief and sadness.

'This is a very, very sad day,' said Hermon school parent Trisha Stewart. 'Our little community of Hermon is the school - what else is there? The school is where the kids get to play sports. Everyone knows everyone, and the kids know each other.' Jenna Douglas agrees. 'Hermon is a learning experience in a country setting,' she said.

In Coe Hill, the suggested plan also drew bad reviews. 'This is an awful plan,' said Coe Hill parent Linda Patterson. 'This is a very sad day for our community. The Ontario Ministry of Education needs to know that people move to rural areas for that lifestyle. We don't care about cafeterias, fancy gym equipment or new buildings - we moved here recently because we wanted our daughter to have a simple life, and she has excelled. We gave up a lot to be here.'

Patterson has other concerns as well. The school board has allowed only 20 days for public input before voting whether to accept the discussion paper, likely to happen either June 13 or 20. Patterson thinks it is critical that parents and others find a copy of the Draft Long-Term Capital and Accommodation Plan online, and read the whole 125 pages. She also suggests locating and reading other Ontario government funded studies that address directly some concerns with small school closures: Super Schools - Travel Times for Children, and Rural Schools and Educational Reform. Patterson suggests that concerned residents write letters to the local board, as well as contacting local school board trustee Lucille Kyle.

'The worst of it all is that there will be four- to six-year-olds with a very long bus ride,' said Hermon parent Chris White. 'This is where I went to school, this is where I want my kids to go to school.'

'The bus ride alone from Slabtown to Hermon is already a one-hour ride,' noted Douglas. 'Small children already spending two hours per school day on a school bus could be facing up to three hours. That's too much.'

Wollaston Township council called a special meeting on June 2 at the council chambers. Following input from residents attending the meeting, council passed a resolution directing the clerk to write a letter to the board's director of education 'to ensure that those considering this document understand the importance of the Coe Hill School in providing accessible and quality public education to the children of Wollaston, Limerick and Tudor and Cashel Townships; and the closure of this school would have a detrimental effect of the well-being of the students and the community.'

Also attending the meeting was Tudor and Cashel Reeve Wanda Donaldson. She told council that two of their schools were closed in her time: Millbridge and Gilmour. She noted that the communities fought hard at that time to keep their schools, but learned that there is not much that will change what the board has already decided to do.

'We are just raising money for new playground equipment,' said Mandy White, Hermon Public School parent's council chairperson. 'We are almost at our goal. And although the school hasn't closed yet, now we are again back to worrying about it closing.'

Hermon Public School is likely one of the few schools in Ontario where children can go to the play-yard fence and pet a cow through the fence, grazing in the field next to the school.

'Yes, and you know what the kids say?' asked White. 'They're our cows' - that is what they say!'