

Province 'overhauling' school review process

By Sarah Sobanski

The province is putting a hold on school accommodations reviews in a bid to further support rural and northern education.

What we understand from the Ministry of Education is that school boards have been asked not to begin any new accommodation review processes because the ministry plans to do a revision of the accommodation review guidelines, explained director of education Mandy Savary-Whiteway. Pending that revision, the Ministry of Education has asked school boards not to initiate any new accommodation review processes.

According to a release by the province, it held a series of consultations over the spring in 10 rural boards including Hastings Prince Edwards District School Board. More than 1,100 people were involved.

The engagement sessions were a direct result of the fact that there are many empty student spaces right across the entire province and we have aging infrastructure across the province, said Savary-Whiteway. There simply aren't as many students to fill those spaces. The government had asked that school boards develop long-term capital accommodation plans to address that mainly because you want to make sure that your resources are going to supporting students in the classroom and not maintaining empty space.

Feedback from the consultations lead to the development of a series of steps to support rural and northern education.

In northern and rural areas there's a need to support schools and programming or students, said Savary-Whiteway.

I think that's the key thing when we look at the programs in our northern schools, said board chair Lucille Kyle.

These include overhauling the process that school boards use to review schools for potential closure, providing a new Rural and Northern Education Fund for this September to further learning, providing increased funding for co-operation between school boards and continuing investments in broadband speed, special education supports and experiential learning.

The ministry has said that they will engage in some consultations with stakeholders starting in the fall of 2017, said Savary-Whiteway.

The release stated an additional \$20 million is being invested to support school boards in addressing local needs in rural and northern communities this September.

Savary-Whiteway noted that the board had planned to update its long-term capital and accommodation plan each year. The intention with that plan was always to update it annually. We would update it with new data and enrollment projections to make sure that it is current so that when we understand what the new revisions or implications of that are we'll be able to activate our plans and meet the guidelines.

The plan features local area schools. Accommodation reviews for the board's Centre Hastings schools lead to two school closures this year.