



**Submission to the Ontario Declining
Enrolment Working Group**

**co Chairs
Hon. Dave Levac and Eleanor Newman**

Submitted by:

The Ontario Division of the Canadian Union of Public Employees

August 8, 2008

We are grateful for this opportunity to make a submission to the Declining Enrolment Working Group. The Canadian Union of Public Employees, Canada's largest public sector union, has an over-riding interest in the welfare of our communities. Our members work not only as school support staff, they work for municipalities, social service and childcare agencies and health and long-term care facilities. Some CUPE members interact with the school system through their work; nearly all of them interact with it in the course of their lives, and so we submit this brief not only on behalf of the 50,000 CUPE members who work in the elementary and secondary school system but for our more than 200,000 members province-wide.

Section A: Impacts of Declining Enrolment and Response Strategies

Public schools are the cornerstones of many small towns and communities today. They have served this function since the education system was developed in the 19th century, but in many communities their presence is never more needed than today. The courthouses, the post offices and libraries are mostly gone from many communities. Health care and social service and municipal agencies are increasingly centralized in the larger towns, and in many remote communities schools are the only public institutions that remain.

While we readily acknowledge that the best interests of students should be the uppermost principle guiding this provincial review of declining enrolment, we suggest that the needs of communities should rank a close second—ahead of economic arguments that usually fail to take into account the effect on a community of the loss of its local school. We believe that every effort should be made by the government to sustain every school in the province for which there is strong community support to keep it open.

We believe another guiding principle should be to not over estimate the magnitude of the declining enrolment situation currently facing us. We are already well into a demographic cycle that has seen the decline of almost 90,000 students since 2002-03 and which might see a decline of almost that much in the next four years. But within 5 years, according to demographic data produced by the Ministry of Finance, the decline will level off. Following that there will be an upswing in the school-aged population, beginning in roughly ten years, growing to current levels by about 2020, and continue growing for several years after that.¹

The demographic projections suggest that some areas of the province will be more impacted than others by declining enrolment. The north will be hardest hit, while the GTA will actually experience modest increases in its school-aged population, largely because it is the preferred destination for migrants to the province.

¹ Ontario Demographic Trends: Presentation to Education Partnership table, Ministry of Education by the Office of Economic Policy, Ministry of Finance, May 14, 2007

Different strategies to respond to these demographic trends will be required in different regions of the province. School boards in large urban centres like the GTA, which will continue to experience population growth primarily through migration, need to be given more solid core funding for school programs that meet the diverse needs of its student population. The Toronto public board, for example, runs programs such as: Parenting and Family Literacy, Outdoor Education, Newly Arrived Students, a range of language programs (International Languages, ESL and FSL programs for both school age children and adults), literacy initiatives for both school age children and adults, as well as general continuing education courses.

School boards in urban centres struggle to provide these innovative programs, which, across the province, require thousands of classroom spaces. Many of these programs are not covered by the school accommodation grant nor community use of school funds. Yet they provide invaluable services: they increase the capacity of individuals to participate more fully in their communities and provide people with tools and resources to help them become more productive citizens. Those goals have long underpinned Ontario's education system, from the days of Eggerton Ryerson onwards, and they should be pursued with renewed vigour today and in the future. To do so will require a commitment from this government to sustain and nourish the many innovative programs that currently go unfunded.

Northern and rural boards face very different challenges. The decline of the school-aged population is exacerbated by factors such as distance and geography, which increases the costs of transportation, utilities and supplies. Boards try to cope with the financial pressure that these factors create by paring back expenses, and thus understaffing of schools, especially in support areas, is more common in remote areas of the province. Full-time secretaries are cut to ¾ time or less, classrooms get cleaned less often and maintained less regularly, and remote schools often go without specialist resources like library techs, paraprofessionals and EAs.

As the union representing the vast majority of support staff in the province we respectfully submit that declining enrolment offers an opportunity to finally get support staffing levels where they should be. Seemingly lost in the government's desire to lower teacher/student ratios has been any recognition that support staff/student ratios also have an important bearing on student outcomes. And clearly they do: the whole school environment, including the quality of facilities, influences student outcomes.

We agree with the government's thrust to lower class sizes: we believe the policy should be extended to include support staff ratios. The recently settled PDT agreement between CUPE and school board associations represents a step in the right direction, as it will preserve support staff levels in the face of declining enrolment. We also suggest that the Task Force explore how lowering class sizes through Grade 8 (which received some discussion during last year's election campaign) would impact the space requirements of school boards, and what funding would be required to sustain class size caps through the primary system.

We acknowledge that there will be instances where schools are no longer viable and must be closed. As a final guiding principle we suggest that one strategy that all boards in the province can employ if they must close schools is to retain support staff and re-deploy them throughout their systems. There are almost 300 schools currently involved in Accommodation Reviews in the province. Ontario communities have already been hard hit by school closures and will be further devastated if another wave of them sweeps the province. Declining enrolment leading to a school closure should be viewed as an opportunity to increase resources for students remaining in the system, not as a chance to save money.

Section B: Funding Formula Supports/Effectiveness

Though we were not asked to comment on parts of this section of the discussion paper, we wanted to use this opportunity to restate our position that we believe the school foundation grant, sound in principle, should be extended to cover the cost of cleaning and maintaining, and lighting and heating school facilities. These basic costs were deliberately low-balled in the design of the funding formula and school boards have spread their school accommodation dollars too thinly for too many years, adding to the pressures of keeping remote schools viable². Utilities, upkeep and maintenance have to be considered basic costs of operating a school and they should be acknowledged as such in the school-based grant. Consideration should also be given to acknowledging the need for other support staff specialists that all schools need today, such as library and computer technologists, in the school foundation grant.

We have already weighed in on the other question asked in this section, about the educational value of smaller schools vs. their value to the community. We believe every effort should be made to sustain quality educational programming at every school in the province where there is strong community support for the school. For rural and remote schools in particular, it is important to acknowledge they serve many functions beyond their role of delivering public education to children during the day. Rural schools serve as the social, recreational and cultural foundation of their communities. They are places where children spend the day learning, and they are also children's playgrounds, adult education centres, child care centres, community centres, recreational facilities, meeting halls, and occasionally electoral polling stations. Without such infrastructure, it becomes difficult to maintain a viable population and economic base in rural areas. Schools form an integral part of the social and economic fabric of rural communities.

² See Hugh Mackenzie's body of work for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) on how the funding formula set the pupil accommodation grant benchmarks at a deliberately low rate, especially: "Turning Point? Time to Renovate Ontario's Education Funding Formula," CCPA, 2006.

Section C: Partnerships

One principal that we advocate very strongly on the issue of partnerships involving school space is that they exclude private, for-profit companies. The opportunity to share space in a public school should be limited to those (non-profit and public) organizations that share with school boards the mission of public service.

The ministry requirement that boards explore opportunities to enter into joint transportation consortia has resulted in some successful partnerships between boards, though there have been bumps in the road. There have been instances where new entities were created that tried to exclude their employees from support staff bargaining units already established at the boards. We believe there are areas of school administration that could be explored for partnerships but, at a minimum, collective agreement provisions must be respected and ideally, boards will work in partnership with bargaining agents when working in partnership with each other, with the goal of extending solid labour relations to the new entity created.

Partnerships between boards can offer an alternative to contracting out of support staff work, a longstanding sore point with this union. School grounds and maintenance are traditional problem areas, but recently more boards are contracting out administrative functions such as information technology work and payroll services. We recommend that before a board considers contracting out any part of its operations, including school grounds and maintenance, IT, payroll and transportation, to a private company it explore the possibility for partnerships with neighboring boards. School boards will find that CUPE local unions will be willing partners in ventures that explore alternatives to contracting out their work.

Partnerships between school boards and other public sector partners are a promising area for school boards to explore in an era of declining enrolment.

School boards could partner with municipalities to maintain school grounds, including snow removal. School fields present some of the only green space available in urban centres. Boards could and should maximize use of these spaces, which have long suffered from neglect under the funding formula. Lack of proper funding for school grounds has led many boards to contract-out grounds maintenance. Economics rather than value to the community has become the overriding consideration. Partnerships with municipalities make sense because school boards and municipalities are the custodians of public green space. Together they have the potential to restore school grounds to conditions in which communities can take pride.

The Task Force should also examine a proposal by a Toronto councilor to use fields as a geo-thermal energy source for the community. Partnerships with local hydro utilities could enable school boards to generate funds, which could allow schools adjacent to suitable fields to remain open.

School grounds have so much potential to offer communities, which are being shortchanged by the sale of school properties to developers. Once public space is lost to the private sector, it is gone forever!

The Task Force should take another look at how to sustain what was once a leading example of school board-municipal partnerships, the program between the City of Toronto and The Toronto school board to share use of swimming pools built into schools. Tragically, the program appears to be nearing its end as the school board has not received funding from the provincial formula to sustain its share of the cost of operating pools, and the city is unwilling to cover the full cost. The school board has been left incapable of fulfilling its obligation to its municipal partner in a program that benefits both the school population and the wider community.

Programs that use school space and are run in partnership between school boards and community agencies should be promoted and expanded across the province. As an example, the Kawartha Pine Ridge board very recently established the Teen Education and Mothering (TEAM) program, which “enables pregnant teens and mothers between the ages of 13 to 21 to continue their high school education, develop their parenting skills, address their emotional, social and physical needs, and receive onsite care for their infants (ages up to 18 months).” A TEAM backgrounder (provided to CUPE) describes how the school board works in partnership with various community agencies to run the TEAM program:

In the spring of 2008, Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board agreed to fund a full-time teacher, part-time social workers and school counselors, and to provide classroom and childcare space and learning materials to support the TEAM initiative. The YWCA Early Years Centre committed to providing child-minding services and program coordination while the Alpha House would offer life skills and peer support through topical information sessions and training. The Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District Health Unit agreed to assist with public health nursing support, prenatal education and links to other health unit programs. And, the Northumberland United Way approved financial resources to enrich the program. A variety of other community partners offered in kind support as needed.

The Working Group should survey school boards to find out which are offering programs like these, and promote the most innovative programs and best practices among them.

The Working Group should also look at neighboring provincial jurisdictions, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, where innovative programs that use schools as hubs for community and health services are being funded by governments committed to sustaining local schools.

The description of Manitoba's Community School's initiative, from the government website, provides a good sense of the scope of this program, which is more oriented towards engaging the whole community, adults and students³:

Community schools can act as a hub for a broad range of services, supports and opportunities that strengthen and support schools, families and communities.

In establishing Community Schools, MECY wants to increase student success in communities of particular need in our province. The main goal of Community Schools is to help communities achieve a new level of success, by encouraging the involvement of parents, community leaders, and community agencies as "partners" — providing a range of services and supports that any given community needs.

In doing this, Community Schools offer a new centre of activity in a neighbourhood. The community schools provide gathering places where adults and children can get together for educational, social, recreational and cultural activities.

Saskatchewan's Schools Plus program, by contrast, is centered more on students, bringing a range of services into the school for students to access⁴:

SchoolPlus is a province-wide initiative led by Ministry of Education and the provincial education system that promotes learning success and well-being for every child and young person. It envisions a province where every school is actively improving student outcomes through the delivery of a strong learning program and serving as a centre for social, health and other services for children and their families.

These programs take a holistic approach to education, using the neighborhood school as the hub for programs that sustain the social conditions under which education proper can occur. This province could do more to promote readiness-to-learn initiatives for its students. For example, Ontario was recently given an "F", compared to other provinces, on its school nutrition policies.⁵ This represents a serious policy oversight: concern about childhood obesity and fitness has never been stronger, and it is a truism that healthy minds need healthy bodies to sustain them. Many school boards contract out food services to companies that typically offer the fast-food choices that have contributed to bulging adolescent waistlines. School facilities should be renovated wherever possible to enable them to offer healthy food choices to the growing minds and bodies of its student population. We suggest to the Task Force that the government should promote student nutrition through the funding formula by sustaining the renovation of school facilities to enable them to provide wholesome food choices in cafeterias staffed by board employees,

³ Manitoba Education, Citizens and Youth website: <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/cspi/>

⁴ Saskatchewan Education website: <http://www.learning.gov.sk.ca/schoolplus>

⁵ Are Schools Making The Grade? School Nutrition Policies Across Canada. (Aileen Leo, Centre for Science in the Public Interest, Ottawa, Canada.) October 2007

overseen by board nutritionists. Partnerships with community health organizations could be explored that would place schools at the center of healthy nutrition programs for students. In addition, evening cooking and nutrition classes for adults would help maximize use of the facilities, and promote good nutrition more widely throughout the community.

Section 4: General

Declining enrolment offers opportunities to re-think the range of services we provide to school-aged children, and the wider community, and to find creative use of school facilities that would otherwise be closed due to funding pressures. This has been demonstrated by the growth of innovative programs such as those described above and it will be demonstrated again when the province introduces the Early Years full-day program for four and five-year old children. We have no doubt Early Years will prove to be extremely successful, and will have people wondering what took so long! We also predict its success will lead to pressure to expand it to include three-year olds, and, in anticipation, we encourage the province to explore this potential development, in consultation with community partners and stakeholders.

It is unclear if the enrolment projections used by the Working Group account for the Early Years program, so it isn't possible to assess how much empty classroom space will be used by Early Years programs. Across the province it should add up to thousands of classroom spaces. It is critical that adequate funds for cleaning, lighting, heating and maintaining classroom space used by Early Years programs be provided to school boards at the outset of the roll-out of the program.

School-based childcares also need to be sustained by school operations funding. There's no questioning the value that community-based non-profit childcare provides. Best Start and other school-based childcare programs have proven to be wise investments for the province and are excellent examples of using the school as a hub for community services.

"From cradle to grave" is how one CUPE member responded when CUPE school board support staff were recently asked how school boards should do things differently in response to declining enrolment. It is sensible that Ontario and other provinces are finally following the lead of other countries in establishing early-learning and school-based childcare programs. Given the *other* demographic trend underway—much talked about but not usually in the context of declining school enrolment—the aging of the baby boomers, it is appropriate to explore how public schools might be adapted to meet the growing needs of our aging population.

Some indications of how school boards are meeting these needs are not very encouraging. Adult continuing education courses are on particularly shaky footing across the province, having been eliminated at one board recently and cut back at others because of funding pressures. Northern elderly residents are not alone in experiencing isolation and social withdrawal; unfortunately that can occur in crowded cities too where opportunities to

casually interact with other citizens—outside of shopping—are all too few. School boards can typically offer adult continuing education courses only in evenings because of shortages of school facilities. They need to be given resources to make classes available to adults—especially seniors, at more convenient times of the day to offer the most educational services possible.

The Task Force cannot examine declining enrolment solely in terms of JK-12 enrolment trends and projections. The adult population in communities also has learning requirements and should have access to schools in their communities for their learning needs. There are creative examples of adult use of community schools that should be promoted province-wide. The Overland Learning Centre in the Toronto District School Board developed when community members approached the North York Board of Education about keeping the school open for the purpose of providing learning opportunities to adults in the community. The Centre started by offering Yoga, sewing and watercolour classes as General Interest courses to local community members. A local advisory committee works with the school board and in determining which courses should be offered in the location. At present it is open 6 days per week and 11 months per year, offering Adult ESL classes, General Interest and Seniors programs such as computers, fitness classes, arts classes, and skills training classes to assist adults in acquiring work. A local neighbourhood school is an ideal location for seniors to attend classes--after all they do pay education taxes too!

“Community use of schools” is particular grant that allows after-hours use of schools to community and recreation groups. The grant has recently benefited from an injection of ministry funds but more could be provided to lower barriers to community use of schools. However, “community use of schools” has a broader connotation than just after-hours programs and the Working Group would benefit from a full exploration of what community use of school facilities could really amount to if funding was not a barrier. School libraries have been terribly neglected under the funding formula, and are not the valuable resources to students—and the wider community—that they could be. School grounds are often not kept in the condition needed to provide quality recreational opportunities to students—and, again, to the wider community. One is hard pressed to think of a wiser use of public funds than utilizing school facilities to their maximum potential.

In order for schools to be used to their maximum potential, this Task Force needs to anticipate what schools of the future have to look like in order to accommodate the many uses that can be made of them. Elementary schools should be built equipped to accommodate child cares, parenting and family literacy centres, full day junior and senior kindergarten, with washrooms suitable to the age group, libraries, lunch room/location for breakfast programs including food preparation, gymnasium, toileting areas for students who require assistance, and a “school nurse” room that could house public health nurses who would visit the school on occasion. Secondary schools will need state of the art libraries with appropriate information technology infrastructure, facilities to offer trades programs, cafeterias capable of producing in-house nutritional menus, and well-equipped gymnasiums that serve after-hours community needs too.

Schools in both panels need to be designed and built specifically to enhance the learning programs of some special needs students. These schools and their subsequent enrolment will never suit a “general population” funding formula, and need to be sustained by a commitment to provide the maximum educational experience possible for the greatest number of students.

School boards should reserve spare school capacity for innovative uses such as partnerships with community agencies. Boards can also more creatively use “spare” space to meet their own internal needs. For example, they can use surplus space to provide adequate, ongoing professional development for staff. A “closed” school could remain active as an in-house training centre.

Summary

It will be clear by now that the Canadian Union of Public Employees sees schools as irreplaceable public resources and that governments should place a premium on sustaining and extending the value they provide to the community at large. The demographic trend that has affected school enrolment in recent years is one of many that the system has absorbed since its creation, and not as severe as the disruptions caused by wars in the last century. The government needs to continue to preserve and renew its stock of public schools, which will be needed into the foreseeable future. It needs to continue recruiting and retraining staff for existing programs and for new functions they will be called on to perform in the future.

More than anything else, this Working Group needs to send a strong message to the ministry that the rate of school closures that has occurred around the province in recent years—and that will continue to occur unless immediate measures are taken to intervene in current school accommodation reviews—is not supporting the ministry’s mission of long-term planning for the educational needs of this province’s students.

Why do we need to keep schools open in the face of declining enrolment? We have focused, in this submission, on a number of reasons: to get better staff ratios; the need for infrastructure to support the Early Years and Best Start programs; to sustain adult education programs and other initiatives such as parenting classes, to forge partnerships with social service agencies and other public sector entities, and to help community groups offer a variety of programs.

To this list we would like to add: to make public schools a more attractive option to parents who would otherwise consider private schools for their children. We believe that part of the bleeding of students from public to private schools has been motivated by dissatisfaction with the rigidity and standardization that the funding formula promotes, and the program and staffing cuts and large class sizes that it has demanded since its introduction. Were boards better funded to provide innovative programs and staff them properly, we believe the public system would see thousands of students who have left return.

We appreciate this opportunity to share our views on declining enrolment with the Working Group, as it is of vital interest to our members in the school board sector and beyond, and we would welcome the chance to further participate in the work of the Working Group if our views or other resources were sought.

:as/cope491
August 8, 2008
T:\Ont. School Bds SEE DOCUSHARE\declining enrolment brief.doc