

The ice cream school

To the Editor,

This letter is actually about public school funding, not the summer treat you enjoy so much ? here is a connection to ice cream, so read on.

It has been no secret for decades that Ontario would have to take seriously the demographic changes in the province's population. I wrote blogs about this 20 years ago when the best demographer we have in the province, David Foot, was decrying the political decisions around building more facilities. It was clear that very soon these same facilities would be dramatically underused. No one seemed to take notice in the government at the time, whether it was New Democrat, Conservative or Liberal; it was all about getting votes today and new schools tend to do that.

Well, as Foot said decades ago, unless there is a dramatic change in immigration policy, there will be huge overcapacity in the public education system very soon. And here we are, despite the expansion during the McGinty years of the kindergarten program that now offers schooling to four-year-olds.

So in 2017 we have a massive reduction proposed in public school facilities in Ontario.

It has hit home in North Hastings with the proposal to close the school in Maynooth, a community which just lost its bank. As with other communities, citizens in Hastings Highlands are working hard to convince the Ministry of Education that schools are an important community resource.

It's important to remember that schools are funded through your property taxes, and over the past 10 years, the province has reduced your education tax rate about 40 per cent. So they are working to control their costs for education, hence the desire to close under-utilized schools.

So how are some communities responding to this cutback in school facilities and the drive to bus four-year-olds from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. in order to fill bigger community schools?

Well, the outrage in Markdale, Ont., has resulted in a local business agreeing to fund up to \$4 million in operating and capital costs for the local school. You heard that right: in addition to their substantial property taxes, the Chapman Ice Cream Company is prepared to fund the local school (designed for 350 students with 140 enrolled) to keep it open.

Now the matriarch of this company is a fabulous woman who deserves all kinds of credit for her community/employee spirit. When they had a fire some years ago that destroyed the plant she kept all of the employees on the payroll until they were back in operation again. And the family makes terrific ice cream to boot!

But they should not be funding public education for the Beavercrest School in Markdale, contrary to what your Education Minister Mitzi Hunter and the Bluewater School Board think. This will mean that students in Markdale will get a real advantage over students in Maynooth or hundreds of other rural communities in Ontario that have no major corporation prepared to fund school operations.

It's simply very bad public policy that will result in private funding of public education...but only in those communities that have a funding sponsor like the Chapman's, and only for the aspects of education or time frames these private funders are interested in providing.

So talk to your local school board trustee about this inequity for students in areas like North Hastings without a private multimillion dollar education funder

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