

# Education advocates urge Ont. to turn mothballed schools into community hubs <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

An education advocacy group called on the province Monday to turn potential school closures into opportunities to deliver community services.

But Education Minister Kathleen Wynne disputed the number of schools the group said were slated to close.

At the same time Wynne said her ministry does not have a solid count of how many schools are on the chopping block, saying that's a moving number.

There are 172 Ontario schools scheduled for shutdown and 163 more under review, according to People for Education.

Instead of shutting them down, consideration should be given to keeping some open, and using the extra space to set up child, family and youth resources and programs, said the group's Executive Director Annie Kidder.

"Children and families are like an ecosystem, that health is connected to education, is connected to poverty, is connected to housing, that mental health is connected to youth engagement, physical health affects kids ability to succeed. All these things are connected but we still don't have a framework."

The report says as well as being used for their traditional purpose, schools could become community hubs providing services such as daycare, parenting centres, community kitchens, public libraries and health clinics.

"That's exactly what we're attempting to do ... we're doing what we can to make it clear to the system that we expect this to happen" said Wynne of the idea to make schools into a "hub" of services for children, families and youth.

Enrolment is down primarily because of declining birth rates and people moving, says Kidder.

Even the substantial number of immigrants calling the province home isn't enough to make up for the shortfall caused by people having fewer children.

The number of new students enrolling in Ontario's elementary schools has dropped by 15 per cent since 1997 and by 14 per cent in secondary schools since 2002, according to earlier figures released by the group.

By 2012, there will be 140,000 fewer students than seven years ago, according to the new report.

It also pegs the average number of students in elementary schools at 310, with secondary schools averaging 812.

"We're moving to a system of larger and larger schools. It doesn't necessarily make educational sense though," says Kidder.

"These school closings actually end up changing the face and the look of Ontario. They affect much more than just the education of the students in those buildings, they affect whole communities and whole neighbourhoods."

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- reprinted from the Canadian Press

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** kindergarten <sup>[3]</sup>

demographics <sup>[4]</sup>

school system <sup>[5]</sup>

full-day early learning <sup>[6]</sup>

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