

Alternative to school closings ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

With enrolment declining by the thousands every year, the Toronto public school board's plan to start closing some of its half-empty schools makes good sense. But closing is not the only option for every underutilized building.

There are opportunities to fill some of these schools by adding programs that would serve the needs of the whole neighbourhood: child care, evening and weekend recreation, activities for seniors, public health clinics, and settlement services for new Canadians.

But turning schools into vibrant community hubs, particularly at a time of budget constraints, requires school trustees and city councillors, as well as their officials, to work together in imaginative ways.

Unfortunately, trustees and councillors seem to prefer fighting over who should pay to keep school pools open, for example, or, just recently, over after-hours parking on school lots.

Given the difficulty trustees and councillors have been working through bureaucratic silos on pools and parking, it does not bode well for their ability to cooperate on broader issues.

In a report last week, Chris Spence, the board's director of education, indicated that he wants to address all the needs of students, not just those that occur during the school day, and the realities of their neighbourhoods. He is promoting "full-service" schools as part of his overall plan to improve student achievement, tackle social problems and put the board on a sustainable financial footing.

"Investments in superior curriculum and the most technologically advanced classrooms will only be squandered unless more pressing needs of children and their parents have already been addressed," Spence argued on the Star's Opinion page last week.

Later this month, trustees will be asked to approve plans to create 16 full-service schools, which could be open all year long and provide a range of services for students and the surrounding community.

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-reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Ontario ^[2]

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