

January 22, 2014

Peter Adam, Superintendent  
Chair of ARC  
Renfrew County Catholic District School Board  
499 Pembroke Street West  
Pembroke, ON K8A 5P1

Dear Superintendent Adam

I would like to address the Accommodation Review Committee by reflecting on the importance of retaining the status of our small rural schools in the Renfrew County Catholic District School Board.

As the old adage goes "It takes a community to raise a child", the parents, the teachers, the church, the supportive individuals that help with school fund raising, the tax payers who earmark their taxes to the Catholic School system and the support of the school board itself. The efforts of all these individuals and organizations nurtures the growth of each and every child in the school.

Parental and community support for our schools has been nothing short of tremendous. Innumerable volunteer person hours and financial resources have provided materials for school programs and support structures for school yards. This comes from personal commitment to make our total school community strong. Mutual co-operation brings community members together.

With discussions of school closure, we now feel that all these efforts, by so many individuals, have been in vain. Now we feel a sense of abandonment.

The loss of a school is devastating. When you recommend to close a school, you recommend to close a community. We have our local municipalities working hard to sustain economic growth in so far as having staff in place to do just that. These individuals use creative means to attract industry, plan events and facilitate programs that retain and support the growth of our communities. The school board creates economic growth too by hiring teachers and support staff. I believe that the Renfrew County Catholic School Board has an obligation to be part of that economic growth that keeps our communities strong. Without a community school, what attracts families - without families, how do you realize community growth or even maintain the status quo.

Let me digress. When the then Separate School system of Renfrew County built St. Mary's in Wilno in the early 1960s, it became a proud focal point of our community right next to the church. Along with many others, I was fortunate to be educated at St. Mary's in grades 8, 9 and 10 - the first three years that the school was open. We had the most dedicated, quality teaching staff one could imagine. We had a playground that had been ploughed by a farmer the year before the school was built. We played on that furrowed field, it wasn't disked or harrowed or what you can now call landscaped. There were no school busses. As a side bar here, in grade 10, when my sister was starting grade one, her brother and I drove a horse across the snowy fields to get to and from school. Random boulders in the ploughed field became our base pads during softball games. Our students were in our glory.

We have had many successes from that small school. From that first year in the early 60s, St. Mary's has produced students who have gone on to further education to become doctors, nurses, professional foresters and loggers, farmers,

chefs, technological experts, security specialists, educators, members of our armed forces, business people, loving parents, and yes, even politicians. These individuals have become exemplary community minded persons who treasure the experience of being educated in a small school. In conversations with former St. Mary's students, one can strongly sense that the memories they savour and relish are priceless.

At Vatican II, the Church shifted its emphasis from institution to community. Its "Declaration on Education" said a "Catholic school is distinguished by an attempt to build community, permeated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and love." In response to this declaration, our Catholic schools now have a triad of school, church and family. Catholic schools exist to assist committed families and their parishes to celebrate and live their faith. Again the Renfrew County Catholic School Board is one of the three points of this triad that has an obligation to ensure that this triad not only remains strong but that it never gets destroyed. We must realize that this Catholic and school community does not exist unless all three pillars, parish, families and school are in place and functional. In absence of a community school, students become disconnected from their home parish. At a time when we want our young people to become more engaged in parish and community activities, we must all have committal to this triad relationship. It cannot disappear.

We all can appreciate the basis of the Renfrew County Catholic School Board's decisions is to save money in the long run, but we believe the Board must also consider saving the life of the community. Closing a school will still mean property owners in our community pay taxes.

The Catholic school system has to remain strong. We are being challenged from all directions by the undertow that parts of society present as there is always opposition to religious school funding. But, we have to prove that through excellence in programming, through excellence in teaching, through excellence in leadership, through excellence in promoting the essence of Catholic principles, the Catholic school system must continue to show leadership in making our school communities strong.

In conclusion, I would ask your Accommodation Review Committee to consider addressing a few inclusions in your report that would help to keep our Catholic schools in our communities:

1. derive creative means to share resources, share administration of schools, reduce the operational costs
2. adjust plant requirements, or, what it takes to keep our physical structures viable even if the complete plant is not required
3. determine the reasons why students from our Catholic communities are being educated in the Public School system
4. with the help of our parishes, continue to lobby that property owners, especially Catholics, support Catholic funding through their taxes

In summary, I appreciate this opportunity to speak to this group. Your ARC committee's activities are very transparent and you should be commended for ensuring the open communication that exists in this process.

Yours sincerely,