

OntarioBrigitte Kitchen
York University*Square Feet per Student
Education Reform in Ontario*

The Ontario government's neo-liberal, commonsensical zeal for amalgamation in the name of efficiency drove it to merge the 139 school boards in the province into 72, reduce the number of elected trustees from 1,900 to 700 and cap their salary at \$5,000 a year. Now its new student funding formula is threatening the closing of as many as 600 neighbourhood and community schools across the province, including 138 of them in Toronto.

When the Education Quality Improvement Act in Bill 160 lowered average class size in the province, the government of Ontario had to find a new funding formula to avoid having to restore a portion of the \$1.5 billion it had cut from education spending since coming into office. A consultant was hired to analyze the provincial system of capital finance in which the province approved and paid for specific building projects requested by school boards. A Pupil Accommodation Review Committee, made up of personnel from the Ministry of Education and school boards, was given the task of finding a common funding formula per student in each of the 5,347 elementary and high schools in the 72 school board districts of the province, regardless of geography and local tax base. The Review Committee, using floor plans for new schools under construction and detailed information from the School Facilities Inventory Database, came up with a \$1.74 billion "pupil education grant," matching the square footage of a school to the number of students enrolled. Portables, day-care centres, gymnasiums and libraries were not included in the space calculations.

The new grant system has three components:

1. funding for school operation (heating, lighting, cleaning, maintenance)
2. funding for school renewal (repairs and renovations)
3. funding for new pupil places (construction or lease of additions and new schools)

It is based on a complex calculation of the amount of space students are allotted. Each elementary student is entitled to 100 square feet and each high school student 130 square feet. Children in junior and senior kindergarten are given 50 square feet each because they are only in school half-days. Adult

students qualify for 100 square feet. With this formula, school boards across the province are required to calculate the amount of space their students are entitled to. They then have to subtract the calculated space from the actual square footage of the school. If the existing space is greater than the space the ministry says they can have, the school is considered to have excess space and will not be funded. According to the Ontario government, every school must operate to its full capacity before a school board will be given new money toward building additional schools. The problem with the new funding formula is that it hurts older schools where hallways, stairs and walls make up a larger percentage of the square footage. It also ignores that certain subjects require more space than others. Computer rooms, science labs and art rooms take up more space than a history class.

In June of 1998 school boards were informed that they were expected to develop a pupil accommodation review policy by September 30, 1998. This policy was to include, if necessary, revisions to board policies under paragraph 8(1) 26 of the Education Act to permit the consolidation of schools at the end of the 1998-99 academic year. Boards are responsible for determining whether or not a school has excess space, and should be closed, leased or sold as surplus property. By Dec. 31, school boards across Ontario are to identify which school they will close at the end of the school year and which school can accommodate new students. School boards across the province, well in advance of this deadline, have already announced the imminent closing of 600 schools.

The Toronto District School Board has been the most vociferous in its opposition to the new funding formula. Boards will receive \$5.20 per square foot in pupil accommodation grants. For the Toronto board, the largest in the province, this means a loss of \$322 million in income. The board presently spends \$6.58 per square foot in maintenance costs for its schools. It is faced now with 11 million square feet of space that are no longer funded. This is the amount of space of all the schools in the city of Ottawa. The provincial government arrived at its \$5.20 per square foot grant by simply taking the median board expenditure across the province for operating and maintenance costs and set it as the norm for all boards. The new funding formula represents a 21% cut of the operating costs of Toronto board. Lacking funding for 138 of its schools the board insists that it is forced to close them.

The closing of the schools has created not only an angry uproar among parents concerned about the loss of their neighbourhood school and that their children will be reassigned to more distant schools but also in the local communities. In many areas schools have become an integral part of community life where they are used for day care and recreation programs, meetings for community groups and language classes. Schools also provide space for family resources centres and 34 breakfast clubs. About 80 day-care centres are located in schools scheduled to be closed. The Ontario Coalition for Better

Child Care calculated that as many as 3,700 spaces may be lost at a time when 15,000 children are already waiting for a subsidized space and another 21,000 children of workfare participants have been added to the waiting lists. There is considerable concern that because many of the schools to be closed are in the downtown area, parents may move into the suburbs. The result could be a hollowing out of the city core as has happened in many cities in the United States.

The Ontario government has maintained that the boards have enough money and flexibility to work within the formula without having to close any schools. In a bizarre twist of events the premier has pleaded with Ontarians "to join him in a crusade to fight the school closing." With a provincial election expected in the coming year, the Ontario government is clearly worried about the fall-out of the school closures on its chances for re-election. In a surprise move, the premier announced on Nov. 6, 1998, that his government will make additional money available to the school boards in order to keep the schools from closing. The funding formula is to be amended to take account of the space problems of older schools and schools are no longer expected to have a 100% occupancy rate to receive funding. The Ontario government still insists that school boards can find savings in their non-class room operations. It has support from the provincial auditor, who found in his annual report that school boards lacked "satisfactory systems and procedures for the acquisition and management of school facilities." At the request of school boards, the province will also make available a private sector management team to advise them on finding savings in overhead and administration costs.

The battle over the funding of education is far from over. It will continue in the media. Over the summer and fall, the government spent already \$5.2 million on an advertising campaign to sell its education changes. Further advertising is planned to counter the opposition and other critics, who, according to the premier, insist that the government is cutting funding, when it is spending more in the classroom and improving education quality. If Ontarians are to believe the premier, they first have to accept the new, now amended student funding formula. So far it appears to be yet another unacceptable social cost of the government's Common Sense Revolution.

• • •

Manitoba

Jim Silver

University of Winnipeg

In civic elections across Manitoba in October, video lottery terminals (VLTs) were scarcely an issue. Unlike Alberta, where seven communities voted to remove VLTs and where votes in other centres, including Edmonton, were