

The Challenge for Rural Schools

Andrea Walden

My husband and I operate a family farm in Lambton County and our children attend the local public elementary school, Bosanquet Central. I have been a member of the School Council for the past three years and am currently its Chairperson. The following are my personal opinions and do not necessarily reflect those of the School Council.

When I enrolled my son six years ago, I believed that all children in the public education system received a roughly comparable educational experience. However, my experience over the last three years has led me to conclude that the quality of a student's education in Ontario is dependent on the wealth of the community in which he/she lives and his/her geographical location in the Province.

The following is my personal observation in relation to the following issues:

Libraries:

One of the reasons that I became involved in the Bosanquet Central School Council was because I was appalled at the age and condition of the books my son was bringing home from school. Some of the books were older than I am and were literally falling apart. What you need to appreciate is that the closest public library is located in the village of Thedford, and it is only open for three days a week (6 hours on Tue and Thursday and 2 hours on Saturday). The school library is therefore a critical resource for children in rural communities.

Music Education/Visual Arts/ Drama:

The rural public elementary school my children attend does not currently have a music teacher, nor has it had one for years. Nor does it have a "specialist" visual arts teacher or drama teacher.

Fundraising:

School Councils are increasingly being asked to fundraise for basic school supplies, and, in the case of the school my children attend, the cost of food for the breakfast program. In a rural school, it is exceptionally difficult to raise funds from a community in which many parents are struggling financially.

Last year our School Council raised about \$15 per student through traditional fundraising efforts. To put that in perspective, the School Council allocated \$1000 of fundraising revenue to bus 4 classes to the University of Western Ontario for a robotics workshop. The cost of busing is \$17.00 per student. We are basically allocating a third of our fundraising dollars to the busing costs of one field trip for four classes. This leaves very little money to spend on other items.

In an effort to provide more educational opportunities to the students despite the challenging economic situation in our community, the School Council has sought assistance from charitable foundations, service clubs, and corporations. The school has fortunately received financial support for its breakfast/snack program from local churches and a charitable foundation.

The problem with relying on School Councils fundraising efforts to provide not just extra-curricular activities such as school trips, but also to cover the cost of basic school supplies, is the creation of a two-tiered system of public education in which students in wealthier communities receive a better quality of education because of the financial resources available to students in those communities, whereas students in less affluent often rural communities struggle to acquire the basics.

Why Rural Schools Matter:

Because of the nature of our small business, which is a family farm, we must live in rural Ontario, and we need our community schools. Not everyone in rural Ontario works in agriculture. Others work in the service sector - in stores and restaurants in lakeside communities. The children who reside in these communities deserve the same opportunity to succeed academically as those in urban centres. Their potential to contribute to society should not be limited because of the economic challenges their parents may face or the geographic location of their home in the province.