

Education Minister Doug Currie defends school changes on P.E.I.

“This is not about rural and urban, this is about fairness.”

Education Minister Doug Currie says the ongoing school change process may be difficult for some, but is necessary to deal with disproportionate class sizes, student-teacher ratios and academic programming across the P.E.I. school system.

“It’s really an attempt to look at a balancing of the population that we do have to make better use of our schools.”

On Tuesday, the Public Schools Branch dropped a bombshell report that recommends closing five schools, major rezoning and reconfiguration of schools across P.E.I. and increased access to french immersion.

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Many families and communities are reacting with anger, sadness and disappointment over news of the proposed closures.

Many are seeing it as an attack on rural P.E.I., as four of the five schools recommended for closure are located in rural communities.

Kerri O’Brien lives in Georgetown with her family and has three children at Georgetown Elementary School – one of the schools on the closure list.

She sees the situation as people who spend Islanders’ tax money now telling them they can’t have a school.

“We built our family here and we pay taxes just like everybody else does, but because we’ve chosen to live in rural P.E.I. it seems like we’re being penalized.”

Currie dismisses any notion that rural schools or communities are being targeted.

Out of the total 21,000 students in P.E.I., only 2,500 students will be affected by the proposed closures and rezoning if they go ahead as recommended, Currie

said. And of those 2,500 impacted, 1,800 are in Charlottetown.

“I don’t see this as a rural versus urban issue,” he said.

A number of schools in P.E.I. are currently bursting at the seams with students, including Stonepark Intermediate and Spring Park Elementary, both of which are well over capacity.

This has led to large class sizes and student-teacher ratios that have raised concerns from teachers and parents over the last several years.

Meanwhile, other schools are so underused there are some classes with as few as one child in a grade in some areas of the province.

Since teacher allocations and specialist resources are based on school enrolment, schools with small numbers of students do not get the same level of academic programming as schools with larger populations.

This imbalance negatively impacts students on both ends of the spectrum and must change, Currie says.

“It’s all about fairness,” he said.

“This is about using our resources to the best of their potential to continue to improve learning experiences and quality for all children.”

Currie says will not take a position on the recommendations, because they still must go to the three-member board of the Public Schools Branch, who will make their own recommendations.

“We all recognize that this is an emotional issue, I’m respectful of that,” he said.

“At the end of the day the reason we’re in this situation is there has been no government that’s really consistently allowed the (school) board to do this... this is about a balancing of the system.”

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