

School closings moratorium shot down

The London Free Press -
Wed, June 4, 2008

**The Conservatives say 15
schools in the London area are
now threatened**

By PAIGE AARHUS

Liberal MPPs shot down a motion yesterday that would have put a moratorium on school closings, including 15 in the London area.

Opposition House Leader Bob Runciman said he wasn't surprised that the motion was defeated by a vote of 48-16 in the legislature.

"There was a lot of hooting and hollering and interjections when I moved the motion. It wasn't something they seemed to be taking seriously," he said last night.

The Thames Valley District school board is reviewing dozens of schools because of a steady decline in enrolment.

The Tories said 15 schools in the London area are under threat of closing.

"I think certainly there's been a lot of people concerned about the closures, and the fact that their kids will have to be on a bus for over an hour and a half coming to school and back," Runciman said.

The hope, he said, was to review government funding strategies and examine "alternate usage" policies before any further closings.

Runciman said rural communities suffer when elementary schools close, with declining property values and business closings often following a school shutdown.

He blamed Liberal backbenchers for the results of the vote.

"We're seeing an endemic in the current government and that's the acquiescence of backbenchers to any sort of breach of promise," he said.

"Even though they're not advised about the issue, they get in line. Essentially they're not much more than being taken for granted."

But Huron-Bruce Liberal MPP Carol Mitchell said it's ironic Runciman should be calling for more money to save public schools.

"During (the Conservatives') term in office about 200 private schools were opened, so what in fact did they think would happen to our rural schools when that was put in place?"

Mitchell said declining enrolment is the main reason 50 of Ontario's schools are slated to close this year, but it's a problem that can't be solved by a moratorium.

"I know there is a pressure on rural schools . . . We are working towards strengthening rural Ontario and we understand that makes us a better province," she said.

But Mitchell said while school closings are a big concern, yesterday's motion was designed more to encourage dissent than fix the problem.

"I'm not sure why the Tories would bring a motion like that forward when their record on education at best has been dismal."