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**Subject:** FW: AMO Policy Update - Ministry of Education Releases New Process for School Closures  
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March 27, 2015

## **Ministry of Education Releases New Process for School Closures**

The Ministry of Education has revised the Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines (PARG) that governs the local School Board process to consider school closures. In addition, the Ministry has released a new Community and Planning and Partnerships Guideline (CPPG) which outlines how School Boards are to work with municipal governments and other community partners to fill underutilized space in schools.

The CPPG mandates that School Boards, prior to initiating a Pupil Accommodation Review, must reach out to municipalities and other community partners to obtain planning related information and to explore potential partnership opportunities for underutilized space. Only after completion of a capital planning process can a School Board initiate a review to consider whether a school should be consolidated or closed. This is a positive development.

There are a number of significant changes to the newly revised PARG including:

- a new obligation of School Boards to formally consult with municipal governments;
- a shift away from considering the impact of school closures to community well-being and the local economy toward a more exclusive focus on student achievement; and,
- a reduction in the minimum duration and number of public meetings required for the Pupil Accommodation Review process.

AMO raised many issues and provided practical suggestions about the guidelines before they were finalized by the Ministry, not all of which are reflected in the final version. It is positive to see a municipal role formally incorporated into the process through a new obligation of School Boards to notify and consult with municipalities. However, AMO is disappointed that School Boards will not be mandated to invite interested municipalities to sit as members on the Accommodation Review Committees (ARCs).

There are other significant concerns with the new guidelines. Of primary concern is a new shift away from considering the impact of school closures to community well-being and the local economy toward a more exclusive focus on student achievement. All the value considerations are valid and should be considered in a holistic manner. If not, there may be a disconnect between School Board decisions and local municipal planning priorities that seek to create strong communities and strong local economies. The municipal sector is also concerned that the new changes will serve to reduce public engagement in the Pupil Accommodation Review process rather than enhance it.

It is important to note that the new guidelines only set out minimum standards for School Boards to follow. The guidelines are flexible. Boards may choose to exceed the provincial standards if community voices express the need. Municipalities are encouraged to review the guidelines and make representations to School Board Trustees on what the local standards should be in their community.

On a related matter, AMO welcomes the recent appointment of Karen Pitre as the Premier's Special Advisor on Community Hubs. It is hoped that this appointment and creation of an advisory group will accelerate the development of a province-wide policy. An avenue with great potential are approaches that grow schools into community hubs by integrating local programs and services, such as libraries and community centres within existing school infrastructure, where it may be practical and cost efficient for municipal governments. Space may also be well utilized by non-profit organizations. The community hub model is an opportunity that could work well in some parts of Ontario and may serve to avert unnecessary school closures in many cases.

Please see the Ministry of Education [website](#) to view the new guidelines.

Please see AMO's [letter](#) dated December 18th, 2014 providing feedback on the proposed guidelines.

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