The parents of Mary Hopkins Public Elementary School Council in Waterdown have finished an editorial article for the Flamborough Review and Hamilton Spectator concerning the potential closing of our Elementary School. Ideally we would like it to appear in the paper in its entirety.

Open Letter to the Hamilton Wentworth District Board of Education, Hamilton City Council, and Flamborough Residents:

The Ontario Minister of Education states “A school building and its grounds are more than a practical site for instruction and learning. They are also a hub for wider community activity. Ultimately, a school's condition reflects the state of commitment of one generation to the advancement of the next.”

I wanted readers to know that parents, like myself, involved in School Council are getting prepared to prevent the closure of Mary Hopkins Public Elementary School on Mill Street North in Waterdown, and to help preserve the building and land, as part of the local Waterdown designated Heritage District properties, for community use.

We feel, based on some recent input, that a closure may be further off than 2009, however now is the time for residents to plan and act. The school board has let us know that its plan is to close Mary Hopkins. By making the announcement; the School Board really wants to gauge the reaction of the community to the proposed closure, which requires your input.

Our motivation goes beyond the fact that the parents of the Waterdown core, who now live within walking distance of Mary Hopkins, are angry that their children would have to be bussed outside their neighbourhood. It also concerns parents that more children are being bussed to larger schools, rather than building smaller new local schools which can have a better record of meeting education and safety needs for students. More local schools alleviate the need to use costly bussing systems (that transport kids without seat belts) and diesel buses that idle outside our schools contributing to air pollution and global warming. We agree that one bus is environmentally better than a host of cars, but nothing beats walking to school.

More local schools also keep more local residents employed and encourage neighbourhood pride. Look at those residents in and around Mary Hopkins, not only parents, who congregate at the school as a source of community involvement, and those who have been improving the gardens and working to improve the building facilities over the years. This work continues and supports Mary Hopkins’ exemplary record of student achievement and school pride. The Board should consider that closing schools can ultimately lead to larger class sizes, more classes and an impersonalization of schooling with “children lost in a sea of children”. We worry that larger
schools and a lack of neighbourhood connection to a school can lead to increased vandalism, bullying, less volunteerism, and lack of school spirit. At Mary Hopkins, children get a chance not only to know everyone in their grade, but pretty much everyone in all grades, all of the teachers, and benefit from individual positive time with their principal. This connectedness fosters continuity, social responsibility and attachment to the school. School closures contribute to a breakdown of social connectedness among students and parents who live both in and outside the immediate community.

The Hamilton Wentworth District School Board uses a formula that proposes that if a renovation costs more than 65% of the cost of building a new school, they will lean towards building a new school. With costs rising well beyond initial estimates, that means that at least 35 – 50% more tax dollars are spent building newer, less permanent school structures than refurbishing ones that were built to stand 150 or more years (Mary Hopkins will celebrate 100 years of serving our community in just 13 short years.) It is reasonable to assume that the HWDSB also looks at the value of the land that it can sell, and we can blame the imbalance of Provincial Government grants for promoting the building of new schools and portables rather than refurbishing existing schools like Mary Hopkins (refurbishing doesn’t attract provincial grants).

Mary Hopkins and area residents want the HWDSB to respect and to recognize that Mary Hopkins Public Elementary School is of significant historic and community value to Waterdown. Given its location at the core of Waterdown, Mary Hopkins should now be officially recognized as a key historic building and its preservation should be assured. The first school in Waterdown was established before Confederation as part of what now stands as the Waterdown Alliance Church on Mill Street North close to Dundas Street. In 1860 Grace Anglican Church was first erected on 2 acres of land set aside by residents for the church. The village school was relocated to Sealey Park before becoming overcrowded. The land adjacent to Grace Anglican was being used as fairgrounds. In 1918 the fairground land was purchased as the site for the new school; and Waterdown and East Flamborough Union School Section No. 3 was built. The school’s principal Alex Cooper occupied the pre-Confederation limestone home just south at 50 Mill Street North, as once did Dr. R. A. Riddell, head of schools in Hamilton. The village’s high school occupied the upper floors until 1927 when a new high school was constructed at Dundas and Hamilton Streets. In 1954 the name of the village school was changed to Mary Hopkins in honour of the first teacher in Waterdown. Mary Hopkins is not currently designated an Ontario Heritage Property, this is a process which needs to be started by Hamilton City Council.

Hamilton Councillor Margaret McCarthy has told us that the school is located within a designated Heritage District, zoned for community use only, and that special considerations would need to be taken into account before any sale or change of zoning. She has said to us that while new schools are needed to service a growing population, Mary Hopkins’ preservation would best serve the educational needs of the immediate area and, according to her understanding of School Board policy, reduces the need for costly bussing services. Since the School Board’s plan, if not amended, is the sale or destruction of the school, we, as a community, need to come to the defense of Mary Hopkins.

The Hamilton City Council and its heritage designation committee can be lobbied to further designate the Mary Hopkins Public School and its land an Ontario Heritage Property. This formal designation helps prevent the sale of the land, mis-use of community property, and destruction of the building. I personally believe that the school should remain available to the whole community, if not as a local public school, which would be my first choice, then possibly as a multi-purpose public resource. The site could be used to house a new library, community centre, seniors centre, public pool, public gymnasium, sports field, boys & girls club, a new day care, an after-school tutorial program, a community music program and so on. The building’s preservation for this purpose ensures that a mix of public and private community interests would benefit the entire Waterdown community and provide more facilities to a growing and aging population.
In order for any of this to happen, our community needs to get involved in the decision making process and let their voice be heard now. Residents should contact their City Councillor; Margaret McCarthy (mmccarthy@hamilton.ca, tel. 905-546-2713), the Mayor; Fred Eisenberger (mayorfred@hamilton.ca, tel. 905-546-2489), the local School Trustee; Karen Turkstra (karen.turkstra@hwdsb.on.ca, tel. 905-515-8726), the Ontario Minister of Education; Hon. Kathleen Wynne (kwynne.mpp.co@liberal.ola.org, tel. 416-325-7204) and MPP for Ancaster-Dundas-Flamborough-Aldershot and Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Education; Ted McMeekin (tmcmeekin.mpp.co@liberal.ola.org, tel. 905-690-6552), the Waterdown East Flamborough Heritage Society (wefhs@hpl.ca, tel. 905-689-4074), local community service groups and churches. Residents can also contact the Mary Hopkins School Council to be kept informed of community consultations, petitions, and other events aimed at planning for the future of Mary Hopkins School building and land: maryhopkins.sc@hwdsb.ca

We’ve gotten involved. I certainly hope that you do too.

Wayne A. Powell, Co-secretary
on behalf of the Mary Hopkins Public Elementary School Council
Waterdown, ON


Wayne Powell