

Briefing Note
March 1, 2005

Issue: Parents close school at Sheshatshiu

Background:

- Friday, February 25, a group of parents placed a chain and lock on the doors of Penamin McKenzie School, Sheshatshiu.
- Kanani Penashue acted as spokesperson for the group in media reports.
 - She has been hired as Director of Education by the Band Council.
 - Since the Labrador School Board operates the school, she has no jurisdiction or involvement in operation of the school.
- Ms Penashue has indicated in the media that:
 - parents are upset about the findings of the recent educational assessments, and
 - parents want the federal government to take over the school.
 - ✓ Federal officials have taken the position that the federal government will not assume responsibility for the school before the Reserve is created.
- Marcel Ashini, Band Manager, has written e-mails, related to the closure, to members of the Maintable for Registration and Reserve Creation. His e-mail referenced;
 - an incident where the vice principal “verbally attacked a young boy,”
 - an earlier incident where the principal was “shouting at Innu staff,”
 - the fact that Dr Philpott has not met with community members to discuss the results of the education assessment which was conducted in Natuashish and Sheshatshiu, and
 - that the Federal and Provincial governments were not taking the issues seriously.
- February 25, Sean Dutton advised Mr. Ashini that provincial officials would not meet with the Band until the school has been allowed to re-open.
- February 25, in response to Mr. Dutton’s e-mail, Mr. Ashini indicated:
 - “I am just the messenger here. . .”
 - the parents took the decision to lock the school, and he would advise them of the province’s decision but could not guarantee that the locks would be removed, and
 - the province should pressure the Federal Government to get involved and “send their officials that can make decisions and not wait until the next meetings to occur.”
- During the 2003/04 school year, Dr. David Philpott lead a team of researchers from the Faculty of Education at MUN in conducting an educational assessment of school-aged youth in the communities of Natuashish and Sheshatshiu.
 - The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) contracted with Memorial University to conduct this assessment.
 - October 2004, the research team presented a document entitled “An Educational

Profile of the Learning Needs of Innu Youth - Brief Summary of Findings” to the Maintable on Registration and Reserve Creation.

- The conclusions of the research team indicated that:
 - most Innu students were performing below grade-level,
 - schools reported poor attendance,
 - there have been very few high school graduates,
 - students have a very poor facility with the English language, particularly at the primary grades,
 - students presented learning challenges which may be associated with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.
- The team concluded:

“Perhaps the most significant finding of the study is that the results validate the perceptions and impressions that key informants - Innu leaders and educators- reported at the outset: Innu youth are of average ability, consistently display diverse strengths and abilities, and lag in formal school achievement levels due in large part to poor attendance.”

Recent issues

- Dec. 14, during a meeting of the Maintable, all parties agreed that the MUN contract with INAC would be extended and Dr. Philpott’s team would develop appropriate solutions to the problems identified in the study.
 - The chief negotiator established a steering committee consisting of representatives of both governments and both Band Councils.
 - ✓ It was agreed that Dr. Philpott would be responsible for formulating recommended solutions but would discuss issues with the steering committee.
- Jan 6, the primary section of the school was closed because of cold weather.
 - About 40 primary students came to school.
 - Although Board policy requires teachers to teach any students who come to school, even when it is closed, two Innu teachers refused to do so.
 - A verbal altercation ensued between the two teachers and the Principal.
 - Cindy Fleet, acting Director of Education traveled to the school to meet the three individuals.
 - The two Innu teachers were accompanied at the meeting by the Chief and Cal Patey (former Director of Education for the Labrador School Board) who has been hired as Education Consultant for the Sheshatshiu Band Council.
 - Following the meeting, the Chief advised Ms. Fleet that it had been decided the principal would be fired and that she would be expected to handle that problem.
- Jan 20 the two Band Council Chiefs wrote members of the Maintable and indicated:
 - That school reform begin immediately and not in a piecemeal manner.
 - That the Innu be given a budget for their participation in the steering committee.
 - That the four parties to the steering committee be funded to allow each group to hire

experts.

- Feb 8, during a meeting of the Maintable, legal counsel for the Innu took the position that the Steering Committee was responsible for formulating solutions and that Dr. Philpott was a consultant to that Committee.
 - He then demanded that INAC provide funding for the Innu to hire educational experts to sit on the Committee.
 - Following considerable discussion, it was agreed that the Committee would continue as originally intended.
- February 16, Chief Quopee wrote the chair of the Labrador School Board and asked:
 - what steps the Board intended to take to correct the problems identified in the Philpott report,
 - what steps the Board intended to take to improve student retention, and
 - whether the Board was conducting an performance assessment of the principal.
 - ✓ The letter noted that the “leadership of the Sheshatshiu Innu had called for the removal of the principal”.
- Feb 24, the vice principal was speaking with a student who had been playing dangerously close to a school bus.
 - Kanani Penashue, Innu Director of Education entered the school and chastised the vice principal, with the student present, for raising her voice to the student.

Control of Education

- The Innu have, for many years, taken the position that the educational outcomes of the students will improve if they have control of education and if the school offers an Innu specific curriculum.
- Federal officials indicate they would support control of the school being turned over to the Innu as soon as the Innu have gained capacity to do so.
 - Innu representatives have suggested they will purchase the capacity as soon as the school is turned over to them.
- For many years, the province has attempted to investigate ways in which the Innu can play a greater role in governing the school.
 - During the 1980's, the Labrador Roman Catholic School Board established an Innu Committee which was given responsibility for selecting teachers and for determining whether a teacher was to be disciplined.
 - During the early 1990's, government agreed to establish an Innu school board.
 - ✓ The Innu did not accept this offer because they were not willing to abide by all the requirements of the existing legislation and were not willing to accept the NLTA as the bargaining unit for the teachers.
 - In 1998, in accordance with an MC, officials of the Departments of Labrador and Aboriginal Affairs, and Education entered into discussions with representatives of both Band Councils regarding the creation of an provincial school which would be governed by an Innu Education Authority.

- ✓ The Authority would function in a similar manner as a school board.
- ✓ Discussions ceased when the Innu were not willing to accept the NLTA as the bargaining unit for teachers.
- On several occasions, government offered to permit the Innu to establish a private school, however this offer was not accepted because, among other items, the DOE is not permitted to fund private schools.
- Recently, provincial officials held exploratory discussions with the Chief and representative of the Sheshatshiu Band Council with a view to establishing a provincial school which would be governed by an Innu Education Authority.
 - ✓ One of the conditions under which the Innu would consider this is that all individuals currently employed in the school would be reassigned to other schools prior to the provincial school being established. That is, the Innu want to decide who will be employed at the school.
 - ✓ Interest in this proposal appears to have diminished or disappeared since the Innu were advised that individuals currently employed in the school have successor rights under provincial laws.

Current Status

- The school remains closed.
- The Chief advised that the issue of removing the school principal and vice principal must be resolved before the community permits the school to open.
- Federal officials have advised that devolution to of the school to the Band Council will not be considered until Reserve Creation is completed.
 - At that time, devolution will be considered only if the Innu have demonstrated they have gained capacity to do so.

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