



and



**Alberta
School Councils' Association**

**Submission to the
Northland School
Division Inquiry Team**

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A. Introduction and Purpose – why a joint submission?

The Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) and the Alberta School Councils Association (ASCA) make this joint submission to the Northland School Division Review team because the two organizations share many of the same values regarding the central role that parents and communities play in the education of children. Both believe that children are better served when parents, schools and school boards work together in a collaborative fashion as partners.

The significance of this long held belief by the two Associations is reinforced by *Setting the Direction* (2010) and *Inspiring Education* (2010), two recently released Alberta Education vision setting documents. Both see parents and communities as vital members of the learning team and both see a future where students and families are welcomed, respected and supported so that they can be successful.

Both Associations also endorse the recommendations of Alberta's *First Nations, Métis and Inuit Educational Policy Framework* that, among other strategies, calls for parents, the community and other stakeholders to work together to meet Aboriginal students' needs (strategy 2.12).

Northland School Division is a school system in transformation. It has faced and continues to face many challenges that defy easy resolution, yet within these challenges are the seeds of opportunity.

This submission, while reflecting briefly on the past in an attempt to inform the future, focuses on these seeds of opportunity. The fundamental theme and value underpinning this submission is the power inherent in a collaborative approach to helping students in Northland School Division succeed.

The realities and depth of the of the Northland School Division student achievement gap will take a united and combined education system effort to resolve; spanning from the home to the classroom, to the community, to the boardroom and to the Ministry.

B. About Northland School Division

The history and unique set of services it delivers to isolated communities makes Northland School Division unique in Alberta. As observed by Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, life is understood backwards but lived forward. A backward glance at Northland School Division captures its unique nature and provides context to the discussion and recommendations that follow.

The following factors collectively illustrate the unique place Northland has in Alberta and its history as well as its broad delivery of services.

1. Operating Statute

Northland School Division operates under the provision of Alberta's *School Act* and, since 1965, its own operating statute, *Northland School Division Act*.

Northland School Division was created as an operating entity by the provincial government in 1960. Unlike other school divisions in the province that have been operating with locally elected school boards since the creation of Alberta in 1905, Northland was initially governed by a provincially appointed official trustee and superintendent. This arrangement served the Division until 1965 when the Alberta legislature proclaimed the first *Northland School Division Act*. This Act called for the provincial appointment of five trustees who would replace the Official Trustee. These five trustees were appointed for a three year term and included an appointed chair from the Faculty of Education, University of Alberta; one representative from the Department of Education, one representative from Municipal Affairs, one representative from Public Welfare, and one resident from the Northland area. The goal of the cross ministry representation was to provide for the co-ordination of the various government services to the students of Northland. The Division operated from Edmonton with a provincially appointed superintendent.

The *Northland School Division Act* was amended in 1968. This amendment called for the appointment of seven trustees, five of which were to be residents of Northland.

The Alberta *School Act* of 1970 replaced provincially appointed superintendents with local board appointed superintendents. Northland School Division, pursuant to the provisions of the new act, appointed its first locally appointed superintendent.

The *Northland School Division Act* was again amended in 1976 to allow for the creation of subdivisions within the school division. Trustees continued to be appointed.

The current *Northland School Division Act* was passed by the Alberta Legislature in 1983. This Act created the governance and operating structure in place in Northland today. Key features of this unique governance structure include:

- ✓ Deeming adult persons living on an Indian Reserve to be an elector;
- ✓ Providing for the election of a local school board committee of three (3) to five (5) members for each of Northland's 23 schools;
- ✓ Establishing a corporate board of 23 members comprised of the persons elected as chairs of the local school board committees;
- ✓ Appointing the Auditor General as the auditor of the board.

2. A Unique Student Population

Students attending Northland's 23 schools are primarily of First Nations and Métis heritage. As such, the rich cultural traditions, language, and ways of learning and knowing of First Nations and Métis peoples need to be honoured while at the same time delivering a provincial curriculum and accountability system that is on occasion not aligned with local values and beliefs. This juxtaposition creates a dynamic tension that provides significant challenges for the governance of Northland School Division.

These challenges are referenced in the Alberta Education 2009-2012 *Business Plan*. This *Business Plan* places First Nations, Métis and Inuit student success as a key opportunity and challenge:

According to the 2006 Census, half of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit population in Alberta is under the age of twenty-five. Over the last decade, the province's Aboriginal population has grown three times faster than the non-Aboriginal population. At the same time, the rate of Aboriginal youth completing high school is only half the rate of other students. The achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, Métis and Inuit

people also remains an issue, particularly for First Nations students. Even though the federal government is responsible and accountable for the delivery of education to First Nations students, Albertans recognize that it is essential that all students have equitable access to education. Finding innovative and collaborative ways to address the challenges facing First Nations, Métis and Inuit students will be essential to improving completion rates and student success (p. 70).

Alberta Education, in response to this challenge, lists First Nations, Métis and Inuit student success as one of its strategic priorities for the 2009 – 2012 period:

The Ministry, in collaboration with its stakeholders and partners, will renew its effort to improve First Nations, Métis and Inuit student success in provincially funded schools through First Nations, Métis and Inuit curriculum infusion in all subject areas, focused teacher preparation, improved accessibility to resources and support services, and parental and community engagement. It will also strive to collaborate with First Nations to ensure that all Alberta students being educated on First Nations reserves have equitable access to educational opportunities (Business Plan 2009-2012, p. 71).

Despite the student achievement gap that is most often mentioned as a feature of Northland, the School Division has made some excellent progress in the education of its students. For example, Bishop Routhier School, located in the Peavine Métis Settlement, is featured by Alberta Education in its *Promising Practices in First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education (2008)* series.

Bishop Routhier School had undergone significant changes in recent years highlighted by a renewed commitment by the community and a new school administration. The leadership of the community, the school district and the new principal have taken proactive steps to improve the learning environment to support teaching and learning. These steps include a more cooperative approach to discipline, a focus on teaching,

improvement of attendance and the creation of a safe and caring environment. There had been a significant decrease in discipline related issues due to the increased community involvement (p. 23).

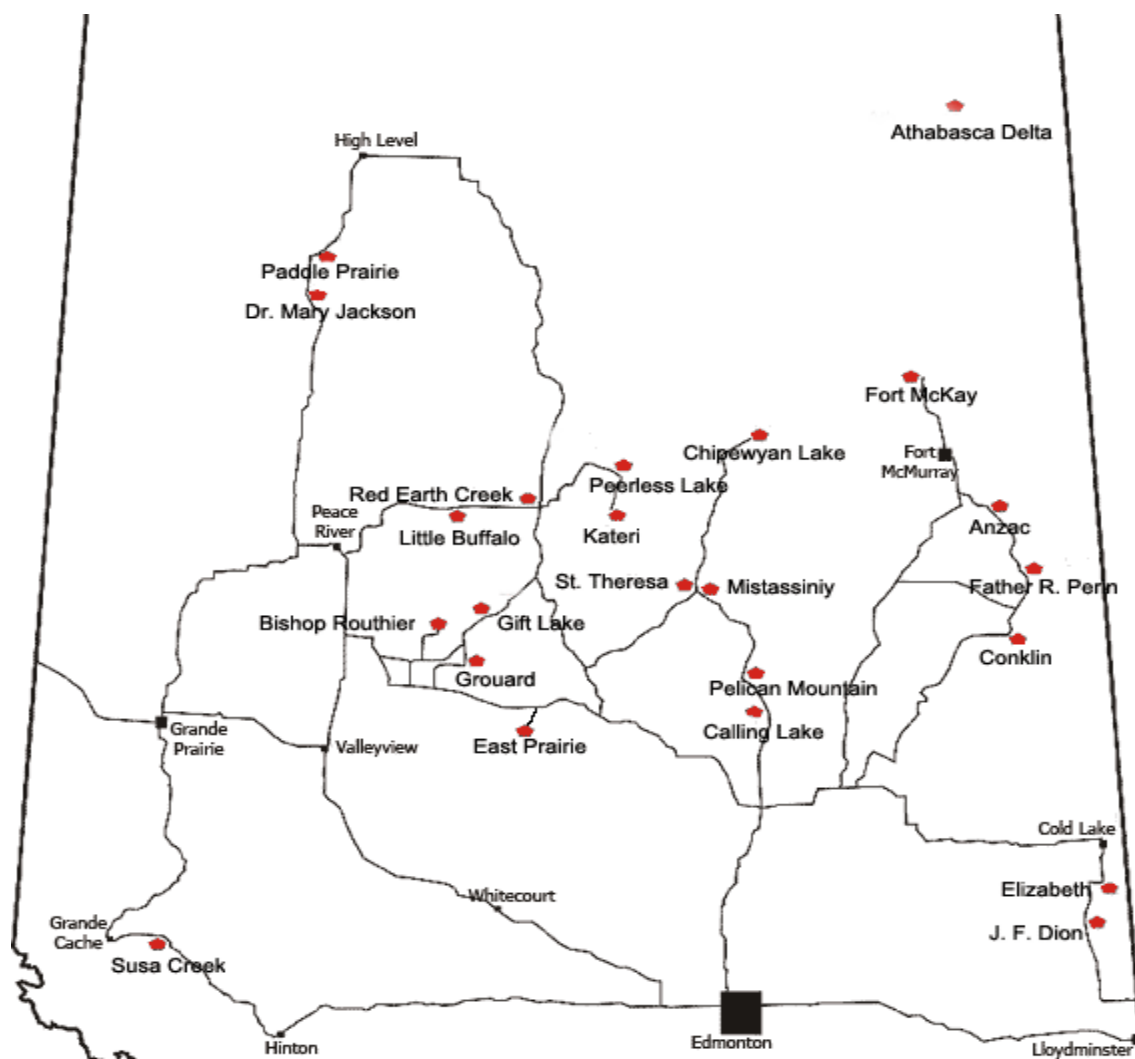
As well, Northland School Division was recently featured in the Zone 1 Alberta Education Minister's Education Leadership Recognition Award (MERLA) for its significant improvement to its fine arts, practical arts and other non-diploma programs.

3. Isolated and Semi-Isolated Communities and Schools

The Northland School Division Act defines the boundaries of Northland School Division as “all that part of Alberta lying north of the north boundary of township 55 excepting from that area any lands contained in (i.) any other school division, (ii.) any Indian reserve.

As the accompanying map illustrates (see figure 1), this includes schools in a fly- in community (Athabasca Delta) and a number of road accessible isolated communities. The isolated nature of some communities, the distances between schools and the lack of some urban amenities create issues of access for students of Northland that more populated and urban areas take for granted. Accessing comprehensive library services, health services, field trips and sports programs are just some examples.

Figure 1. Northland School Division Area



4. A Unique Provision of Services

Northland School Division provides a number of services to its students and communities that collectively have few, if any, parallels in Alberta. For example:

✓ **Teacher Housing**

Northland School Division owns, maintains and operates 140 housing units or “teacherages” for its teaching staff. While the provision of board supplied teacherages was once a common occurrence in rural Alberta at the turn of the century, most boards, with the exception of a few northern and sparsely populated

rural Alberta boards, have abandoned the practice. Northland owns and maintains more teacherages than any other school board in Alberta. No provincial funding support is available to provide this service. Northland School Division, in response to an Alberta School Board's Association (ASBA) infrastructure needs survey, maintains that provincial "funding is required for teacher housing due to the remote nature of Northland School Division's schools, and the nearly impossible process of attracting quality teachers without the provision of adequate housing. There is no available housing for purchase or rent in our communities" (March 2009). The teacher housing program in Northland currently has a one (1) million dollar accumulated deficit. Northland School Division has recently implemented a cost recovery program and is looking at raising teacherage rents by 7% a year for the next three years. While this may help make the teacherage program more financially sustainable, the Division is concerned that this move may result in further difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified teachers and principals.

✓ **Food Services**

All of Northland's 23 schools offer a hot lunch and nutritious snack program at no cost to students attending the school. This 3.1 million dollar program is administered through a combination of central support from 3.8 F.T.E. positions and local community kitchen staff hired and managed by the local school board committee. Funding for the program is provided through a combination of provincial support and private corporate contributions. The food services program in Northland provides a layer of financial and management complexity not evident in other school jurisdictions in Alberta.

✓ **Municipal Services**

Northland School Division, because of the absence of local municipal services in a number of its school communities, operates and maintains 3 water and 6 sewer systems at its schools. In addition, many of Northland's 23 schools serve as community, recreation and celebration centres. A few schools still provide shower services to community residents during non-school time. No provincial funding is provided for these ancillary services yet Northland, of necessity, must fund and manage these municipal and community use services.

✓ **Student Health Partnerships**

While all school jurisdictions in Alberta are a member of one or possibly two health partnerships, Northland, because of its geographic size, is a member of five (5) student health partnerships. These partnerships provide valuable support to students in areas such as psychological services, speech language services, occupational therapy services and physical therapy services. While providing valuable services, the amount of effort and time needed to manage the five partnerships is significant and unique to Northland.

✓ **Boarding Home Program**

Northland School Division provides management and financial support to students who must board in larger communities to complete their high school program. The scope of this program is unique to Alberta and again adds to the administrative complexity of the jurisdiction. Funding for this service needs to be recognized in the grant envelope for Northland.

✓ **In-School Cultural and Language Program**

Northland School Division provides twenty (20) Aboriginal language programs. The programs reflect the Aboriginal populations of the jurisdiction which are Woodland, Plains Cree and Dene. Northland also monitors and administers a variety of aboriginal cultural programs which include experiences such as plays, campouts, music, art activities, native awareness days, native feasts, native honouring ceremonies, mini pow-wows, and Métis fiddling and dancing.

5. Multiple School Calendars

Each of Northland's 23 schools operates under its locally devised school calendar primarily because the Northland School Division Act delegates the authority to establish the school year to the local school committee. While this has benefits in terms of meeting community needs, it provides challenges in terms of increasing administrative and payroll complexity as well as challenges in finding common time to provide professional development.

6. Staff Turnover and Composition

Northland School Division employs the following staff (2007/2008 annual report):

- ✓ 220 teachers (2007/2008) of which 23 are designated as principals.
- ✓ School Food services = 42
- ✓ Maintenance = 14
- ✓ Caretakers = 39
- ✓ Bus and Wagon drivers = 36
- ✓ School support staff = 22
- ✓ Teaching Assistants = 144
- ✓ Central office administration = 28.6

Total staff complement = 545.6

Total student enrolment = 2,807

Staff turnover, particularly amongst teaching staff, principals and teacher assistants is significantly higher than the provincial average. For example, the 2007/2008 school year saw a 24% turnover of teaching staff and approximately the same turnover in support staff. This is double the provincial average of approximately 12%. Turnover of principals neared 50% with 11 new principal appointments for September 2008. The 2007/2008 staff turnover of 24% is consistent with the staff turnover for Northland for the past ten (10) years.

While some staff turnover provides positive benefits to a jurisdiction, a high staff turnover, as is the case in Northland, provides significant recruitment, orientation, training and staff evaluation challenges. These recruitment, orientation and training challenges are further illustrated by the number of years of experience and training possessed by teachers employed by Northland compared to the provincial mean. Northland teachers (2007 ASBA data), on average, have 4.51 years of teacher training compared to a provincial average of 4.77. They have 6.71 years of experience compared to a provincial average of 7.91. Again, this adds to the level of administrative complexity faced by the jurisdiction.

7. Small School Size

Northland School Division, because of the relative isolation of its communities, operates, of necessity, a number of small schools. Half of its 23 schools, for example,

enrol less than 100 students, with seven (7) of these enrolling less than 50 students. The research literature supports the benefit of small schools, particularly for students who have difficulty with schooling. The challenges presented by small schools, on the other hand, relate to questions of financial viability and program offerings, particularly for high school students. Northland has been addressing the issue of program breadth by introducing video conference suites in each of its schools, a travelling CTS lab, and utilizing community resources where available. These technology solutions require support to operate properly.

8. Governance and Administrative Complexity

The Northland School Division Act provides a governance model for the Division that is focused on grassroots democracy and engagement. The 23 local school committees with their 109 school trustees are the key governance bridge between local schools and the 23 member corporate board. Each of the local committees as well as the corporate board needs resource support to properly fulfill their functions. The current (2007/2008) audited financial statement lists board and system administration expenses at approximately \$3.3 million. Approximately one third (1/3) of this expense (\$1.128 million) is related to the Board and local school committee governance functions. This is significantly higher than the percentage of governance expenses compared to total board and system administration expenses experienced by neighbouring school jurisdictions. For example, Peace Wapiti lists 15%, Grande Prairie lists 14%, High Prairie lists 9% and Fort Vermillion lists 13%. The result of this imbalance in Northland is reduced staffing capacity for the Peace River central office to fulfill its functions.

Unfortunately, Northland, despite its uniquely mandated governance model, must adhere to the same administrative “cap” principle (4-6% of expenses) applied to other provincial school jurisdictions. Quite simply, the current “one size fits all” board and system administration expenditure guideline does not serve Northland School Division well.

C. The Scope of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Achievement Problem – more than a Northland School Division issue.

A key point acknowledged by both ASBA and ASCA is that the student achievement gap evidenced by students in Northland School Division is an issue not confined to Northland but in fact an issue that challenges all school boards across Canada that educate First Nations, Métis and Inuit students.

A recent Alberta study (Gunn and Pomahac, *First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education: AISI Provincial Research Review*, 2009) paints a rather bleak picture of this achievement gap. The study notes that while the widening gap in educational attainment is experienced across Canada, it is especially problematic in the western provinces.

The Alberta School Board's 2003 submission to Alberta's Learning Commission emphasizes this "bleak picture".

Our education system has failed these students. It has failed their communities. It has failed the next generation of children who will be born poor and disadvantaged because their parents haven't completed school and can't provide for their needs. The public education system must do better by these students. We *must* stop the cycle.

While the issues are complex, key historical and socio-economic factors continue to negatively affect First Nations, Métis and Inuit student success. These factors are:

1. The Residential School Factor – a Troubled History

Assembly of First Nations National Chief Shawn Atleo believes that First Nations need to take more control of education, in part to counter the damage done by the Indian Residential Schools system, which saw thousands of native children taken from their communities and forced to forsake their language and culture. Chief Atleo maintains that "we have to be directly involved in making sure that unlike residential schools, the school system not only prepares children for the market economy but reconnects them with family, language, culture and land. That is what the residential schools sought to disconnect our people from, and we have been suffering those consequences now for several generations (Edmonton Journal, December, 6, 2009).

This sentiment is echoed by Rob Reimer, chair of Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools, a rural Alberta school division that educates a significant number of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. In Mr. Reimer's view:

I think from a non-aboriginal perspective, what I have seen and what I have really noticed and what has changed me, personally, is a growing awareness and knowledge and understanding of aboriginal people, both First Nations and Métis, and the challenges that they face.

First Nations students are not just another group of children at risk. First Nations are the only group that didn't immigrate to this country. And they are the only group that we have tried for 400 years to separate from their history, from their religion, from their language and from their culture. We tried our damndest to separate them from everything that they knew. We have not attempted that with any other ethnic group. We haven't tried that with Chinese-Canadians, not with Indo-Canadians, not with any other group. We are left with a majority of First Nations people who don't know their own language, their own history or their own culture, and we wonder why they fear authority, why they mistrust school and why they mistrust the white community. We blame First Nations people because some have issues with unemployment and substance abuse. After we have systematically attempted to destroy them, the wonder is that there are so many who are healthy, so many who maintain their traditional ways and beliefs. We owe it to our First Nations to do everything that we can to restore their pride and to help them and their children move forward (January 13, 2010).

While education in Canada for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students has come a long way since the residential school experience, its negative echoes continue to be felt by many families and communities.

2. Socio Economic Factors

Alberta's Learning Commission (2003) acknowledges that education is just one part of the problem and "while First Nations and Métis value education, the success of their children depends on a number of related factors including housing, social conditions and poverty" (p. 85).

A recent British Columbia study of the socioeconomic variables that impact student achievement, for example, found family income and parental education level as the most important among socioeconomic variables and that improvements in socioeconomic status are associated with improvement for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations in school performance (Richards, 2008).

The Sullivan Report, similarly, argues “unless the health, social, and economic conditions of Native lives are generally improved, the problems of language development and lower-than-average educational attainment levels will regrettably remain a part of the Native experience at school” (Bell, 2004, p. 38).

Census 2001 indicates that Alberta’s Aboriginal peoples’ incomes are well below the provincial average. Aboriginal average annual income is \$26,490 for males and \$16,780 for females. For the non-Aboriginal population, average incomes are \$41,071 for males and \$22,814 for females.

Addressing these economic, social and parental issues is largely outside the mandate of school boards and school councils yet they continue to have a direct negative impact on the achievement of Aboriginal children in school.

D. Addressing the Issues Facing Northland School Division

The Northland School Division Inquiry Board, pursuant to section 41 of the *School Act*, has broadly based terms of reference. The Inquiry Board has responsibility to examine larger issues like student achievement, governance structure, and alternatives to the present boundaries of the school division as well as the specific managerial and leadership practices of individuals within the Division. This submission limits itself to the larger issues facing Northland School Division and provides some discussion and recommendations for consideration by the Inquiry Board. Discussion and comments cluster around three themes, these being; students and their learning, governance and capacity building.

1. Students and their Learning

- **Defining First Nations, Métis and Inuit learner success**

While Alberta’s Education’s “Accountability Pillar” provides useful system, program and individual learner assessment information, some Aboriginal communities and organizations argue that care must be taken to add to and broaden the “Accountability Pillar” measures of learner success. In their view, this is needed because of the Aboriginal belief in holistic education which encompasses spiritual, physical, social, emotional and cognitive development. As such, measures of success must reflect this holistic view.

Alberta's school boards and school councils believe in the importance of a broadly based education that emphasizes citizenship education for Alberta's students. This belief in the importance of citizenship education is also held by Alberta's Aboriginal community. On May 21, 2008, for example, the Chiefs of Alberta's treaties No. 6, No. 7 and No. 8 signed an historic document relating to the rights, in part, of First Nations children to an education that is broadly based and emphasizes active citizenship. Principle 7 of this agreement reads:

The child is entitled to receive an education, which shall be free and compulsory, at least in the elementary stages. He shall be given an education which will promote his general culture and enable him, on a basis of equal opportunity, to develop his abilities, his individual judgment, and his sense of moral and social responsibility, and to become a useful member of society.

Alberta Education's recently released *Inspiring Education* (2010) vision setting document supports a general review of how we have defined and measured student success.

Inspiring Education (2010) maintains, for example, that "in times past, a person was considered knowledgeable if they merely possessed information. As technology makes information instantly available, it is no longer possessed solely by experts ... As we focus more on competencies, there will be less emphasis on knowing something, and more emphasis on knowing how to access information about it. There is also greater focus on how to think and do things." Further, "the ongoing dialogue arising from *Inspiring Education* needs to identify new and additional ways of measuring success from this broader perspective" (p.27).

Defining what success for Aboriginal students looks like and how this success will be appropriately measured is a challenge facing Alberta's education system. Many parents and educators believe that Aboriginal students, like some special education students, are disadvantaged by current assessment tools and that the education system needs to "develop provincial processes and student achievement assessment tools to measure and report the progress and growth of students who are disadvantaged by the current tools" (*Setting the Direction*, 2010, p. 8). They argue that conventional reporting on the learning success of Aboriginal learners provides only a partial picture and that the importance of experiential learning and traditional activities outside the classroom must be acknowledged (Cappon, 2008, p. 61).

Edmonton Public Schools created a trustee Aboriginal Task Force in 2007 that spent significant time and resources consulting with Aboriginal parents, students, agencies

and Elders as a first step to establishing its Aboriginal learning policy. A key message received by the task force included the notion that while Aboriginal communities are unique in many ways, they share commonly held aspirations for academic success for their children. Aboriginal parents want their students to have positive school experiences, graduate from high school and have access to a full range of post-high school opportunities. They value schooling approaches that recognize children and youth in the context of their family and community and believe that the cognitive, emotional and spiritual aspects of education are not always well served by some current testing practices. (complete task force report is available at: http://epsb.ca/board/march13_07/item08.pdf)

Given the above, Northland School Division will need to give considerable attention to the question of defining First Nations, Métis and Inuit student success and creating measures, in addition to Alberta's provincial accountability pillar measures, that track progress towards desired outcomes. An integral part of this important exercise, of necessity, involves conversations with the local Aboriginal community and parents about what success for Aboriginal students looks like and the measures that can appropriately be used to track and assess progress.

- **Recruiting, retaining and training staff**

Inspiring Education (2010) puts forward a strong case for the central role that teachers and principals play in student learning. Its view is that “other than parents and families, Albertans see the teacher as the single most important contributor to learner success. They were clear that teachers must achieve excellence if they are to inspire the same level of achievement in learners (p. 7).

Successful school boards establish ends through their vision, goals, strategic plan and policies but understand that it is jurisdiction staff that makes the accomplishment of the vision and goals a reality.

Because of this belief, they place priority and allocate resources to developing the knowledge and capacity of jurisdiction professional and support staff. In short, they create a framework to optimize internal talent.

Authors like Fullan (2005) argue that this capacity building is fundamental to sustaining improvements in student performance. Jurisdictions in the forefront of

development promote ‘learning in context’ – not just through workshops but also through daily interactions in cultures designed for job-embedded learning.

In sum, hiring the right people and providing them sufficient direction, resources and support to do their jobs is probably the biggest lever a school board has in improving student learning.

Because of this, Northland School Division needs to give priority attention to hiring, training and retaining qualified leadership, instructional and support staff. Given its context, Northland also needs to engage and retain more teachers who have an Aboriginal background.

Northland School Division could consider the following strategies to improve professional development for all staff:

- ✓ Create one Division wide school calendar that embeds time for the professional development of professional as well as support staff
- ✓ Focus professional development resources on “job embedded” or “at elbow” development support to principals, teachers and support staff.
- ✓ Work with post secondary institutions to expand training opportunities that are delivered at the school site.
- ✓ Use technology as a delivery mechanism for training opportunities.

In addition, Alberta Education together with Northland School Division could develop a joint plan aimed at providing incentives to principals and teachers to help retain them in their roles.

These strategies, while requiring significant investment of resources in staff development, could be conceptualized as affirmative action strategy’s aimed at providing students of Northland needed staff stability and training common to other parts of Alberta.

2. Individual Student, Family and Community Supports

Setting the Direction (2010) sees a future where all students are made to feel valued, welcomed and respected members of the education system and society, a future where all students are included in the life and learning of their school and their community.

ASBA and ASCA support this vision of inclusion for all but believe that for this to properly occur, individual student and family supports must be in place for those

students and families that need it. Providing these student and family supports will require significant cross Ministry co-ordination and support.

The goal of “wrap around” services to students and their families has been a long standing ASBA and ASCA advocacy position. Some significant steps have been taken to move towards this goal but more needs to be done, especially in socio economic disadvantaged communities like some served by Northland School Division. ASBA and ASCA believe that better models of integrated service delivery are needed; models that have clear accountability, authority and long term funding commitments.

In support of such a model, this submission recommends that the Inquiry Board consider the concept of **Integrated Services Schools** as a model worth pursuing, perhaps on a pilot project basis, in Northland School Division.

Integrated Services Schools build on and extend the concept of community schools, present in Alberta on a limited basis until the economic cutbacks and educational restructuring of the early 1990’s, and currently used, with some degree of success, in Saskatchewan, Manitoba and the United States.

Integrated Services Schools are anchored in the notion of delivery of educational and support services to students, families and communities through the neighbourhood school centre. They are premised on the evidence supported belief that all facets of a child’s well-being impact learning and academic success.

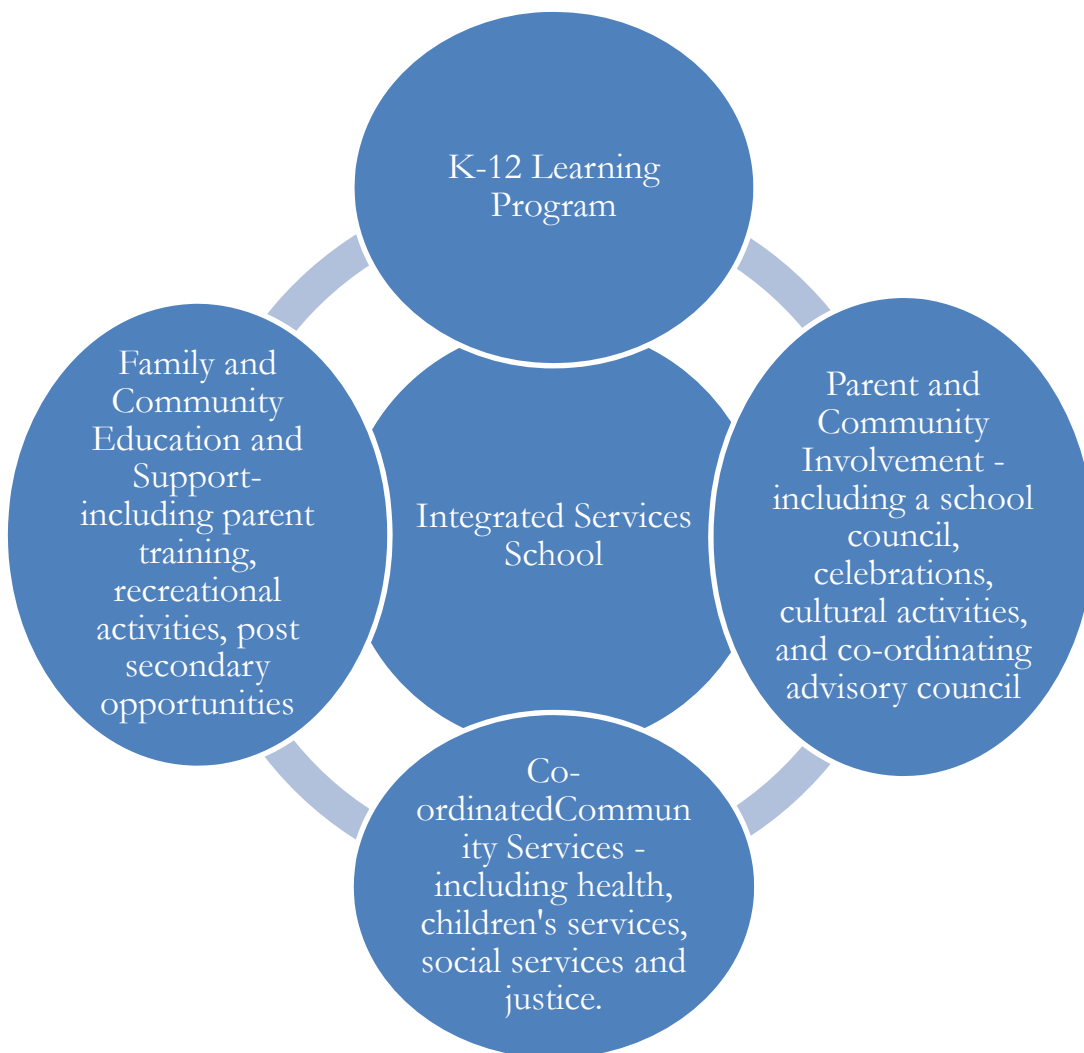
Integrated Services Schools, while centered on students and their learning, provide training to parents and community members and act as the co-ordination and delivery point for a variety of available student and community supports.

The concept of Integrated Services Schools aligns with the Aboriginal belief in holistic education, the connection between learning and the family, and the importance of balance between the academic, spiritual, social and emotional domains of development.

It also aligns with the *Inspiring Education* (2010) proposition that “community resources should be fully engaged to support learning, including expertise, facilities, services and learning opportunities” (p. 31) and that “the community can be a source of leadership, teaching and support through the participation of experts, mentors and elders. Leadership can be found in a variety of organizations including the business community, post secondary institutions, not-for profit organizations, and cultural groups” (p.6).

As each of the schools in Northland School Division is somewhat unique, with some having more available community resources than others, the model would need to be personalized to the needs of each community. Generally, however, each Integrated Services School would have a co-ordinating advisory council, perhaps chaired by the school principal, that would prepare a community needs assessment and a follow up action and implementation plan that would address these needs. Although school and school jurisdiction personnel as well as school council members would be actively involved in the development of the needs assessment and action plan, actual delivery and funding of services would be provided by personnel employed by the appropriate Ministry.

The Integrated Services School concept could be conceptualized as follows:



The Integrated Services School concept and its emphasis on the integrated delivery of services to children and their families using the local community school as an organizing hub is an idea worthy of consideration for the communities served by Northland School Division. As a concept, it is supported by research and best practice studies of successful Aboriginal schooling that point to the importance of positive working relationships both within the school jurisdiction and between the school jurisdiction and parents, community agencies and other external partners (Fulford, 2007, Alberta Education, 2007, Gunn and Pomahac, 2009).

3. Governance

- **The Importance of governance and parent and community engagement**

Elected school boards are one of Alberta's oldest forms of grassroots democracy. Established by the Northwest Territories Ordinance before Alberta became a province, school boards have over 100 years of history of being elected and accountable to local communities. In addition to being accountable to their communities by virtue of their elected status, school boards are also accountable for the provision of quality educational services through the policies, structures and resources that they put in place.

Elected school boards can also positively affect student learning. A recent C.D. Howe study of the best performing British Columbia provincial school districts, for example, found that Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal performance gaps were either positively or negatively impacted by district leadership and governance practices. (Richards 2008). Similarly, best practice studies in Aboriginal education by Bell (2004) and Fulford (2007) found good governance and leadership as the success factor identified most often by researchers.

Quite simply, governance practices matter. School boards, by employing effective governance practices and focusing on students and their learning, can overcome many of the historical and socio economic factors that negatively affect First Nations, Métis and Inuit student performance.

Research and best practice point to a governance role that provides oversight, and accountability mechanisms, emphasizes a policy rather than administrative approach, and unites staff, parents and communities behind a common vision, goals and priorities. Effective educational governance has students and their learning as the core focus. Progress towards student learning goals is regularly monitored and publicly reported.

Good governance practices can both “raise the student achievement bar” and “close the student achievement gap”.

- **The importance of the Aboriginal community voice**

The principles of legitimacy and voice underpin democratic institutions. They speak to the importance of all citizens having a voice in decision making, either directly or through legitimate intermediate institutions that represent their intention.

Applied to the context of this submission, the principles address the importance of meaningful engagement of the Aboriginal community and of its involvement in and ownership of decisions that affect the education of their children. Simply, these principles underscore the importance of the Aboriginal community voice.

Alberta’s Learning Commission (2003) emphasizes the critical importance of this voice. The Commission argues that the best approach for the future is to give First Nations and Métis people more direct control of the education of their children. The Commission maintains:

Dramatic improvements in Aboriginal education and the outcomes for children are unlikely to happen unless Aboriginal people have control and all components work together to address the need for change. The Commission heard that Aboriginal people are tired of being “done to.” In spite of the best intentions of people in the education system, Aboriginal people - especially parents, elders, and community leaders - need to be empowered to take “ownership” of and responsibility for the education of their children (p. 86).

As such, this submission supports the continued public election of governors for Northland School Division and supports processes that actively engage parents and communities in the education of children.

- **Governance structure for Northland School Division**

The Northland School Division Inquiry Board terms of reference include two statements regarding the future structure of the school division:

1. The effectiveness of the current governance structure of Northland School Division, specifically the devolution of authority to local school board committees pursuant to the Northland School Division Act and Northland

Policy 7, Local School Board Committees. In this context, members of the Inquiry are expected to seek input from the 23 communities that comprise Northland School Division about the effectiveness of existing governance structures and alternatives to the present governance structure.

2. Alternatives to the present boundaries of the school division, including consideration of the possible incorporation of a number of Northland School Division schools into other existing school jurisdictions. In this context, members of the Inquiry are expected to seek input from the 23 communities that comprise Northland School Division about the effectiveness of existing school jurisdiction boundaries.

The current governance structure of Northland School Division with its 23 locally elected boards, 23 member corporate board and over 100 trustees has proven to be problematic and in need of transformation.

The design of the current system is, one can infer, intended to engage local communities in grassroots democracy and ownership of local schooling; certainly admirable goals. The dark side of the current design, however, can lead to role confusion and conflict between locally elected boards and the corporate board. This role confusion, in turn, can lead to a lack of clear accountability processes. The current governance structure, with a decision making school board for each school, also encourages an administrative rather than oversight role and makes the establishment of a unified vision, direction and priorities difficult.

To overcome these difficulties and yet maintain necessary parent and community engagement and ownership, this submission recommends that the Inquiry Board consider the following:

- ✓ Most rural school divisions in Alberta are governed by school boards comprised of 5-9 members who are publicly elected through a ward system. While most school systems in Alberta have over 100 years of history electing their trustees, Northland School Division has less than 30. This submission recommends that Northland School Division, for trustee election purposes, be restructured using the ward system concept. This would ensure that the citizens of Northland would have the same democratic rights regarding the education of their children as are available to citizens in the rest of Alberta.
- ✓ Implement, pursuant to the current provisions of Alberta's *School Act*, a school council for each of Northland's schools. School councils in Alberta, although advisory in nature, have proven to be an effective way of engaging parents in

the education of their children and in mustering community resources in support of this education.

The above two recommendations do not address the question of the possible incorporation of a number of Northland School Division schools into other existing school jurisdictions or whether Northland School Division should continue as an operating entity at all. This is an issue that the Inquiry Board is currently discussing with each of the communities currently within Northland. While strong arguments based on “community of interest” and “uniqueness of clientele” principles can be made for keeping Northland School Division together as an operating entity, other arguments can be made for the benefits of attaching certain schools to neighbouring school jurisdictions. The ASBA and ASCA believe in the fundamental democratic principle of self determination and, as such, would support the citizens of Northland in whatever decision they voice with regard to the future of their school jurisdiction.

- **Cross ministry governance advisory team**

The creation of the *Northland School Division Act* in 1965 introduced a bold attempt to create cross Ministry co-ordination in the Division. The *Act* called for the provincial appointment of five trustees and included an appointed chair from the Faculty of Education, University of Alberta; one representative from the Department of Education, one representative from Municipal Affairs, one representative from Public Welfare, and one resident from the Northland area. The goal of the cross ministry representation was to provide for the co-ordination of the various government services to the students of Northland.

A newly transformed Northland School Division will need to revisit these foundational relationships and sharpen or limit its mandate focus to the education needs of students. As such, a newly transformed Northland School Division will also need the support of other Ministries with mandates to provide municipal, social, adult education, community development and health services to families and communities in which schools are located.

Simply, Northland School Division currently is expected to fulfill a mandate that is beyond that which is expected of other provincial school jurisdictions. It has provided some municipal, social and health services to some communities because no readily available alternative service provider has been evident. This must change as the mandate creep evident in Northland has drained resources away from the direct education of children. A rebalanced mandate and accountability will require co-operation and co-ordination at the provincial Ministerial level.

Inspiring Education (2010) references the need to reconceptualise governance and posits the notion of governance teams to deal with the many cross ministry responsibilities facing school boards.

The concept of a governance advisory team that provides cross ministry support to communities and the education work of the Northland school boards is an idea worth pursuing for Northland School Division. This submission supports the creation of a cross - ministry governance advisory team for Northland School Division tasked with implementing wrap around services to children and their families using the school as the delivery hub.

- **Governance guiding principles**

The Alberta Government *First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* outlines key principles that help guide decision making for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students and communities. A brief review of the principles, taken together, helps capture guideposts useful for the Board of Inquiry in its decision making as well as guideposts useful for the educational governance of Northland School Division. In summary, these principles are:

- ✓ **Transparency**

What this means: First Nations, Métis and Inuit parents are aware of and have ease of access to information concerning all aspects of their children's education.

- ✓ **Inclusiveness**

What this means: First Nations, Métis and Inuit parents and communities have meaningful opportunities to participate actively in decisions that directly impact their children's education.

- ✓ **Innovation**

What this means: Outcomes for First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners are improved by initiatives that recognize and model best practices.

- ✓ **Learner Centred**

What this means: Programs designed primarily for First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners are learner-centred and culturally respectful. First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners have access to culturally sensitive support services. First Nations, Métis and Inuit people will have no less access than other Albertans to information about educational choices and opportunities.

✓ Responsive and Collaborative

What this means: First Nations, Métis and Inuit community knowledge is sought and programs designed primarily for First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners are developed in collaboration with Aboriginal communities.

✓ Results Oriented

What this means: Innovative, practical and measurable strategies and actions are supported, monitored and reported on.

3. Capacity Building for Governors, Parents and Communities

Any new governance structure or realignment of responsibilities for Northland School Division will, of necessity, require training for governors, parents and communities. In short, it will require, as a first principle, attention to helping build the capacity for success. To simply restructure without providing ongoing training and support to individuals and organizations impacted by the restructuring is to court failure.

The ASBA and ASCA are both willing and able to provide ongoing training and support to school boards and school councils (if established) in Northland School Division.

ASBA, for example, is currently developing fundamentals of School Board Governance and related training and support for governors. ASBA also currently provides training and support to school boards on a fee for service basis in areas such as communications, legal advice, labour relations as well as governance, policy development and educational services. ASBA has recently established (2010) a provincial task force that is tasked with providing advice and assistance to school boards that want to improve outcomes for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students.

ASCA, as well, provides workshops, resources, information and support that focus on the roles and responsibilities of school councils, engaging school council members and parents in the broader school community, school councils' involvement in education planning at the school and school board level, and relationship building in the school community and beyond. In addition ASCA has recently (2010) signed a grant agreement with Alberta Education that tasks ASCA with fostering the involvement of a range of parents in the education of their children, including First Nations, Métis and Inuit parents.

ASCA has also set a goal to facilitate, encourage and support First Nations, Métis and Inuit parent and community engagement primarily through school councils in order to enhance student learning and achievement.

In sum, both organizations, working together in support of students and their learning, are willing to provide the necessary training support that will be required to implement a new model of educational governance in Northland School Division.

E. Conclusion

The Aboriginal worldview is characterized by a holistic perspective which views family and community as extensions of the school. This holistic worldview emphasizes connections amongst people and community organizations as opposed to separation.

This submission emphasizes these connections and the joint efforts that will be needed to form the foundation for the future of Northland School Division. It provides discussion and proposes a number of suggestions that address many of the issues facing Northland School Division.

Both ASBA and ASCA wish the Inquiry Board well in its deliberations. Both organizations are available for further consultation regarding the support they can provide to a transformed Northland School Division.

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