



The Road Ahead

FIRST STEPS TO IMPROVEMENT

An open letter from the Director General to students, parents, staff and other stakeholders of the Cree School Board.

In June 2008, the Council of Commissioners of the CSB received the Communication, Accountability & Follow-Up for School Improvement (CAFSI) report which was provided by the Educational Review. While many of the findings in this report confirm our understanding of the difficult circumstances surrounding our education results, I wish to confirm our leadership's commitment to dramatically improve these results.

The final chapter of the CAFSI report was entitled ***The Road Ahead***. This chapter confirms a transition for the School Board as we now move from analysis of our circumstances to action planning where we will undertake the journey that will improve teaching and learning in our schools. On November 20, 2008, the Board took an important step on the road ahead to improvement by adopting five resolutions which are summarized in the text box and described in the remainder of this document.

I invite all our stakeholders - students, parents, staff and others - to work in concert to provide a brighter future for our students. Together, we can help students to see that: learning is important and we will help them succeed.

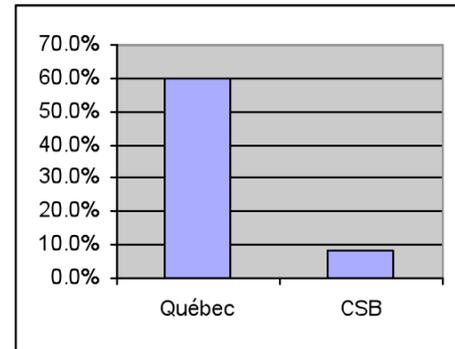
Abraham Jolly
Director General
December 8, 2008

The Council of Commissioners:

- accepts responsibility for the current state of results and the development of an action plan for improvement;
- mandates the Director General to establish a 'coalition team' to guide the content and process of improvement;
- mandates the initiation of a process to examine the Board's mission;
- recognizes ***learning to read*** as its number one priority and mandates the initiation of a process to look at changes in curriculum and the language of instruction;
- mandates the Director General to establish clear lines of communication, accountability and follow-up with each community.

1 The Present State of Educational Results

The Educational Review painted a very dismal picture of student results in all three sectors of the Board (youth, adult and post-secondary). The Review team did not have all the data needed to complete this picture, especially for adult and post-secondary students. However, the picture is still perfectly clear. As illustrated in the graph comparing graduation rates in the CSB with those observed across Québec, student success, as measured by this indicator, is below 10%.



The Review echoed the findings of the Mianscum report on student results:

- too many students do not attend school regularly and when they do, they are not actively engaged in learning and school life;
- the vast majority of students do not acquire the competencies that are mandated by the curriculum (Québec Education Program) that the schools are *supposed* to be teaching;
- neither, from the evidence available, do they learn what we assume is expected in terms of Cree language and culture;
- only a small number graduate; only a fraction of graduates go on to post-secondary education, and almost none of them are prepared to undertake further study without some form of remedial assistance.

The Review team made many recommendations about student results. All of them require time to consider and implement. However, the Council of Commissioners realized that before this can happen, we must acknowledge the present state of student results in relation to both halves of our mission: Cree language and culture, and academic and vocational learning.

THAT the Cree School Board has received the report of the Educational Review and, while it does not necessarily agree with every aspect of the analysis presented, it acknowledges the extremely low level of student success within the Board;

THAT it accepts full responsibility for the current state of affairs; and

THAT it is committed to developing and implementing an action plan to ensure student success and will be accountable to its constituents for the progress of this plan.

The Council has done this in the resolution reproduced in the text box. **With this resolution, the Council has taken the 'first step' to improvement.**

2 Guiding the Content & Process of Improvement

In 1999, Henry Mianscum made the following recommendation to follow up on the findings of his report (cited in CAFSI report, p. 325):

The Council of Commissioners should form a task force to address the problems and develop a strategic plan to correct the deficiencies within its structure in the short, medium and long term. This effort should be in conjunction with all persons associated in the delivery of education services to the student clientele of the Cree School Board. Participation in this undertaking should include the community and schools.

Coalition Team - stakeholders of the CSB working together for school improvement.

The Review team endorsed this recommendation arguing that a separate task force, or **coalition team**, as I am calling it, has the advantage of being removed from the structure of everyday management, as long as clear lines of authority are established and there is no conflict with other management structures within the Board.

The Council of Commissioners has approved the creation of this Coalition team, as stated in the resolution shown in the text box. In the coming weeks I will appoint the team leader and together we will begin to identify other members and shape the mandate and operating guidelines of the team. In so doing, we will be guided by the following suggestions offered by the Educational Review:

THAT the Director General be and is hereby mandated to create a Coalition Team to develop and oversee the implementation of a comprehensive action plan to follow up on the recommendations of the Educational Review, whose terms of reference - its composition, mandate and operational procedures - shall be developed by the Director General in consultation with the Senior Management Group of the CSB.

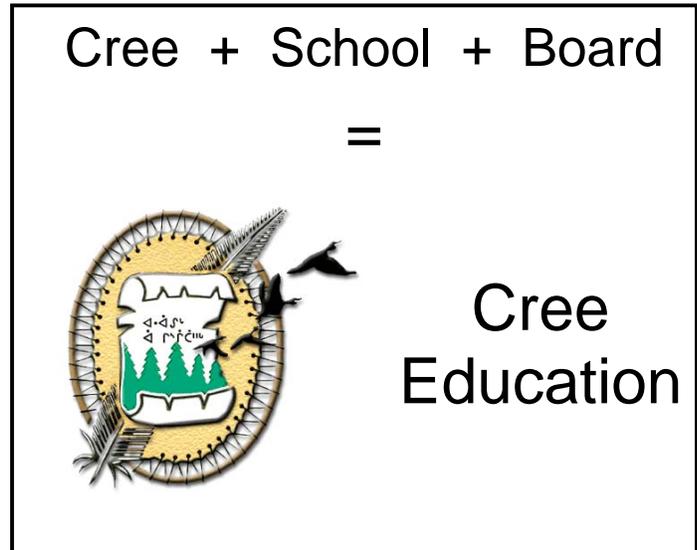
- However it is structured, it is essential that the coalition team involve stakeholders from different levels of the system and find a meaningful way for students to participate.
- In addition to seeking broad representation in this process, the essential characteristic of any member of the coalition team is personal competence; given its history and current state of performance, the Board cannot afford to appoint persons who are not capable of providing the needed direction to change.
- Guiding the content and process of change may well require the help of 'critical friends' - resource persons with whom the Board has a genuine relationship; their role must complement – not supplant – the roles played by Board officials and must support – not undermine – Board ownership of the process.

3 Values, Purpose & Mission

The Educational Review was planned in the knowledge that successful organizations have a clear sense of purpose built on a set of shared values. The Review was therefore framed by Cree values, the purpose of education and the **dual mission** of the CSB: to provide students with a quality education that:

- upholds Cree values, language and culture; and
- enables them to pursue further education and employment in either the Cree nation or beyond.

The Review told us that many stakeholders were unaware of our mission. Some described it as ‘mission impossible,’ a great ideal, but totally unrealistic. Others thought the mission was fine as is.



The mission statement the Review asked stakeholders about has never been adopted by the Board. However, what really counts is not the written statement but the purpose behind the words. Here is what the Review team concluded about this purpose:

We see no valid reason to question the Board's dual mission. Without Cree values, language and culture, the Board cannot claim to be a Cree institution but without the provision of quality educational opportunities to its students, it cannot claim to be an educational institution. It must therefore maintain both halves in order to be a viable Cree educational institution. As the analysis presented in Parts 2 and 3 of this report will reveal, the problem is not with the Board's mission, but with its service delivery. It is not the ends but the means that need to be changed (CAFSI report, p. 37).

The Review team made four recommendations about mission. Ultimately, these recommendations deal with reviewing and shaping our mission statement. Values and purpose are the basis for improvement; however, determining what these values and purpose should be requires considerable discussion. That is why these four recommendations will take time, including consultation with stakeholders, and eventual implementation. At this stage, the Board has decided to initiate a process to consider these recommendations.

THAT the Director General be and is hereby mandated to initiate a process coordinated by the Coalition Team ensuring the involvement of all stakeholders of the CSB to examine the values and mission of the Cree School Board with a view to developing a mission statement for the Board.

4 The Content of Improvement

With extremely poor student results, it stands to reason that the pyramid of support described in the CAFSI report as a necessary foundation for learning is seriously flawed. It is not surprising, therefore, that 96 out of the 115 recommendations of the report addressed the five levels of support shown in this pyramid, from classroom instruction to school board support. Each one of them deals with some aspect of the **content** of improvement - **what** has to change in order to improve teaching and learning in the Board.



Once again, much time will be needed to consider these recommendations, several of which require more data than the Review was able to collect. Because the Board cannot do everything at once, it needs to look at all the recommendations and decide on those which should be accorded the highest priority. There is one such priority that towers above all others: **teach students to read**.

The root cause of single digit graduation rates is not what happens in secondary V but what didn't happen in kindergarten and the first cycle of elementary. With few exceptions, students did not learn to read in the language of instruction that they must employ in order to graduate from secondary school. There are many differences of opinion regarding the learning of language. However, the report (p. 95) states that the research is absolutely clear on one point:

Academic success, as defined by high school graduation, can be predicted with reasonable accuracy by knowing someone's reading skill at the end of grade 3. A person who is not at least a modestly skilled reader by the end of third grade is quite unlikely to graduate from high school.

According to the Review team, addressing this problem requires a new curricular model and changes to the language of instruction used in the early grades. However, the report also emphasizes that this change does not mean abandoning the teaching of Cree language or culture. In fact, it stresses the importance of improving this instruction throughout all grades.

It is obvious that the recommendations on these matters will be controversial, with strong opinions for and against them. It would be irresponsible of the Board not to carefully consider them before making any major shift in either curriculum or the language of instruction. However, as shown by the resolution in the text box, the Council of Commissioners wished to send a strong signal that it recognizes the problem and is going to do everything in its power to address it.

THAT the Cree School Board recognize **learning to read** as its number one priority;

THAT it will take steps to provide assistance to students currently enrolled in its schools to ensure that all students will have the opportunity to succeed; and

THAT the Director General be and is hereby mandated to initiate a process coordinated by the Coalition Team ensuring the involvement of all stakeholders of the CSB to examine and, if deemed appropriate, make changes to the language of instruction and curriculum at all levels from kindergarten to secondary V.

5 The Process of Improvement

Like any type of change, improvement involves **process** as well as content, focussing on **how** improvement will be achieved. As suggested at the beginning of this text, three key aspects of this process are communication, accountability and follow-up.

Virtually all stakeholders talked about the lack of communication, accountability and follow-up within the Board. The commonly held view among a vast number of stakeholders can be summarized as follows:

- there is much talk but little conversation; people do not really listen to each other;
- people do not do what they are supposed to do and there are no consequences;
- actions are *talked* about but nothing actually happens because no one follows through.

Accountability and follow-up first require **communication** - everyone must know what is expected and feel that they are 'in the loop.' Ultimately, effective communication means that all stakeholders are involved in an ongoing dialogue that is shaped by a common purpose - student success. Before this level of communication can evolve, the Board first needs to ensure that simple communication is occurring: responding to messages, requests for information and other forms of support.

Given its geography, the Board must rely on email for day-to-day communication, a system which many people ignore. However, we, the leaders of the CSB, also need to make a much greater effort to visit the communities and meet with stakeholders.

The Education Assembly that took place on November 4-6, 2008 provided a starting point for improving our communications with stakeholders and responding to their needs. The team presented the CAFSI report and stakeholders discussed:

- how to inform community members about the Review and engage them in follow-up; and
- the support they would require from the School Board and other bodies for this purpose.

Clearly, stakeholders want more information and they want to be involved in the improvement process. I told the Assembly that the Board had begun to consider the 'first steps' to improvement, a process that would be taken forward by various resolutions being presented to Council on November 20th.

As reflected by this communiqué, these resolutions have now been adopted and the process is underway. In particular, the

THAT, in accordance with the needs expressed and the commitments made at the Education Assembly on November 5, 2008, the Director General be and is hereby mandated to establish clear lines of communication, accountability and follow-up to ensure that each community is: (a) fully informed about the Educational Review and the Board's action plan for school improvement, beginning with ... [the five] resolutions adopted at this meeting; and (b) provided with the support they need to actively participate in the improvement process at the community and regional levels.

resolution contained in this text box affirms our commitment to a participatory and transparent process to improve the education of our students. **Together, we can do it; together, we will do it.**