

CREE JUSTICE SYMPOSIUM

"Safe Schools and Justice"



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Cree School Board
Commission scolaire Crie

Presentation by :
GORDON BLACKNED
Chairman



Mistissini, January 27, 2009

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Chair Gordon Blackned

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Good morning. Let me begin by thanking everyone for being here today, and particularly to the Grand Council and the Justice Committee for inviting me to speak to you on behalf of the Cree School Board on the fundamentally important issue of justice and safety in our schools.

Criminal justice is not an end in and of itself, but a means. A means to a healthy community, happy families and a prosperous Nation. As the Chairman of the Cree School Board, I approach the issue of justice from the perspective of the needs and reality of our youth. From this perspective, I ask myself and all of you: How can we expect our children to value education and stay in school, if their schools are not safe? If they do not feel respected? If they are unsure of the rules or the rules are not consistently upheld? How can we ask our children to grow up as healthy and productive members of our society if they do not see the law working diligently and fairly to respond to the injustices they see happening around them?

To do well and prosper, children need the security of knowing they are safe, that there is a system of policing and justice that upholds the values of the Cree Nation fairly and uniformly. Without such security, our students too often turn away from structured education after losing faith in our schools and the benefits an education can bring.

Indeed, providing safety for our children creates a positive cycle. The more students feel safe, secure and respected at school, the less likely they are to drop out. The

more youth are educated, the more likely they are to have successful outcomes as an adult – thus helping to create an even more safe and prosperous community as well as a just society for the new generation of students.

Although the Cree School Board has accomplished a lot to be proud of over its 30 years of operation, the number of students graduating highschool is not as high as it should be, and violence and abuse is still present in our schools. Of course, violence is not just a problem in Cree communities but across Canada and North America. We have all turned on the radio or picked up a newspaper over the last few years and seen the tragedy of another school shooting. In 2008 alone, there were at least 8 school shootings across Canada and the United States. And of course, in 2006 there was the shooting by an angry student at Dawson College in Montréal.

Gang violence and bullying in schools is also becoming more commonplace throughout North America, and the Cree communities are not immune.

There is still a lot to do. Indeed, these horrific tales should not have happened for nothing. They should serve as reminders of the disastrous results when a school and community does not adequately protect its students, when it allows bullying to take place and does not properly respond to the warning signs of troubled children. These tales should propel us to action.

It is because of this urgent need to act for the sake of our children that I am so excited to take part in this Cree Justice Symposium. It is an important moment in history when all the parts that make up our great Nation come together to respond to these important challenges. And today I am here with you all today, not only to talk about all the difficult challenges that lie ahead – although there are plenty – but also to share with you what the Cree School Board is *already* doing to address issues of safety in our schools and to discuss ideas we have to build on what we already have to improve safety in our schools and communities in the years to come.

Perhaps the most clear example of our efforts to make our schools safe is the Policy and Procedures on Safe Schools of the Cree School Board. This policy is an overarching guideline that applies to the Board as a whole. It acts as a framework to help individual schools develop local, school-based codes of conduct. To be sure, although there needs to be general principles guiding all Cree schools, each community and school has specific issues, weaknesses and strengths. Therefore, the most effective approach is an individualized approach guided by larger principles. Some of these larger principles and goals of the policy are to :

- ensure all members of the school community are treated with respect and dignity;
- create an environment where conflict can be addressed respectfully;
- encourage non-violent methods of conflict resolution;
- promote safety in the schools;
- promote positive attitudes and behaviours;
- practice fair, consistent and age appropriate disciplinary practices; and
- proper communication and consultation between all school, family and community actors.

The policy also ensures that any searches and disciplinary practices are in-line with the Quebec and Canadian Charters of rights and freedoms as well as the law surrounding crime, youth delinquency and youth protection.

In trying to ensure safety in schools, the policy targets several unacceptable behaviours, including:

- bullying
- theft
- possession of any type of weapons;
- possession or use of drugs or alcohol;
- vandalism; and

- other harmful activities determined by each school.

Building upon these principles, the individual schools have developed codes of conduct providing clear expectations with regards to acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour for all members of the elementary and secondary school community which are in-line with the law and the principles of the Board's safe schools policy.

Other policies which the School Board already has in place deal with issues of harassment, youth protection and the safety of students residing in boarding homes during the school year.

These policies are a step in the right direction, but there is much more that needs to be done to clarify and implement these principles.

The approach which the Cree nation must take to crime, violence and victimization in the schools must be developed with an appreciation of the school context, and the vulnerable and impressionable ages of the children – including, the perpetrator, victim and bystanders. The proper roles of the teachers, principals and other school staff must be clarified and properly communicated, and training on the proper protocol when violence or a crime occurs must be given when necessary. Moreover, the relationship that the school has with the police, parents, youth protection, elders and the rest of the community also needs to be well established to ensure that the appropriate actors are involved at the correct time.

Proper resources need to be available to respond timely to the needs of young perpetrators, victims and other students – all while ensuring that the stability of the day-to-day life of the school is maintained. We must be able to respond to crime and violence, while maintaining the reliability of school classes and other activities. The acts of a few should not detract from the quality of education of the whole.

Realizing these important goals will take a lot of coordination between all parties involved – particularly between the School Board, the Youth Protection services, the Justice Committee and the new Regional Police. Together I am confident we can create a communal and effective approach to creating safe schools – to the benefit of our youth and the entire Nation.

With the creation of safe schools, so much is possible. Indeed Safe schools will breed a sense of justice in our youth which, in turn, will hopefully inspire some of our students to take up the challenge and pursue training and education to work themselves in the field of justice – whether it be through the law, policing or otherwise.

Although this meeting has only just begun, I am already encouraged by the energy and enthusiasm of everyone here and the coordination of ideas and resources that this meeting will facilitate.

Thank for your patience. On behalf of the Cree School Board, I look forward to working with all of you in the days, months and years ahead.