

Health centre policy still up for debate

by Corey LeBlanc

The much-talked about policy on the formation of youth health centres within the Strait Regional School Board has gone back to the drawing board.

At its regular monthly meeting held October 1 in Port Hastings, the elected board approved a motion to defer the recently formed policy back to its policy committee for further deliberations. Like other policies created by the board, the youth health centre plan was released to the community during the test-off process, where public feedback is sought.

The bone of contention at this point seems to surround the issue of consent.

"The always controversial point surrounding the youth health centres is having the parents' ability to opt out or in for service provided by youth health centres," SRSB superintendent Phonse Gillis told the *Casket* in an interview late last month regarding the working committee motion from September 20 that returned the plan to the policy committee.

The recently returned policy to the committee includes a provision for parents to be able to choose if and what services their children can use in such a youth health centre.

East Antigonish board member Frank Machnik agreed with the delay in what he called "such an important issue."

"There are many concerning the health care centres, but there are some issues I have difficulties with and I won't give my approval to health care centres in the schools, unless parents have the option of allowing their children, or allowing the children in consultation with the parents, to suggest we do not want this particular service," Machnik offered.

With the positives, the local board member added, there are some negatives with the proposed policy he wants addressed.

"There are some things that have moral connotations, or whatever, that's up to the parents and the child to make that decision - not the state, not the department of health, not the health care specialists, or the teachers. That is a personal issue, that is a moral issue, and that's the only issue that I have a big problem with."

Machnik wondered what has happened to the idea of choice. He said he has received several e-mails suggesting the board has no choice but to go ahead with the policy.

"Everything today seems to be about choice, but when it comes down to this issue, there is no choice. We either have to take it or lump it."

Let's go forward

East Guysborough member Rosalee Parker was the lone member who voted against the return of the youth health centre policy to the

committee level.

"I did because I believe the board has enough information. We have deliberated, we have discussed it and it is time to go ahead with it," she told reporters after the regular monthly board meeting last Wednesday in Port Hastings.

Parker agreed it is important to have this type of service in schools across the region sooner rather than later.

"I believe it is important to get it into the schools because all of the issues that are out there facing the young people. The young people need information in order to make informed decisions on their life," she offered.

"We have one in Guysborough that I believe is of the utmost importance. It is a great facility and I look forward to having it in all of our schools."

Public input

As the suggested plan returns to the policy committee, the SRSB continues to receive public feedback. A letter and an e-mail were added to the list of reactions at the regular monthly meeting.

In her e-mail, Cynthia Power wrote she was "appalled at the arrogance" of board members even to consider such a policy (including the parental consent guideline), which she suggested undermines the Canada Health Act. She added anyone, including the school board, could be held accountable for preventing youth from access health care services.

"The liability for any adverse affects (sic) on our teens because of decisions made by the school board or parents will rest upon your shoulders. Is this school board, with all its issues, ready to take on the legal ramifications? As a taxpayer, I see my dollars being wasted on a board that would even consider such a policy," she wrote.

In her letter, Lynn O'Donnell - a mother of three youth, said youth need to be able to make their own decisions regarding accessing services of a youth health care centre.

"Youth are the experts in identifying the services and information they need to make healthy, informed decisions about their health," the Antigonish resident wrote.

In conclusion, she encouraged board members to give youth the power to make their own decisions.

"At this point, I understand that the Board is divided on the issue of supporting the clause regarding parental permission. I strongly encourage the Board to recognize the ability of youth to have control over their own health and the ability to make informed decisions," she concluded.

Both pieces of correspondence will be passed on to the board's policy committee to be considered during its deliberation on the issue.

The Casket Oct 11/06