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Beaton defends Inspire program

Some SRSB members concerned over missed class time

by Heather MacAdam
Some members of the Strait Regional School Board are looking to have a program taking place in Antigonish and Guysborough county high schools terminated.

A motion was tabled at the last monthly meeting of the Strait Regional School to have the Inspire program, a program for girls which covers issues such as self-esteem, media analysis, nutrition and dieting, communications, substance misuse, relationships, healthy sexuality, mental health, privilege and oppression and self-care, ended in the local schools. However, the motion was tabled to a later meeting.

The discussion of the Inspire program came up during discussion of the youth health centres. However, they are two separate matters.

Program defended

Jack Beaton, director of programs and students services, said the Inspire program began in high schools in Antigonish and Guysborough counties in the 2005-06 school year.

"It's facilitated by the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre. They have a social worker on staff that brings the program out to the schools and makes sure that things are running and gets it organized."

During the 12 or so weeks that the program is run, Beaton said the centre brings in other organizations, such as Addiction Services or Public Health, to

deal with specific items in the program.

The program is voluntary and is to take place outside of class time. The board, Beaton added, didn't have any involvement with the program being initiated in the schools.

"What people need to realize is that we have had a long-standing relationship with many of our partners. Health, for example, they've been com-

"I don't think there's room for external organizations to be offering programs."

— Frank Machnik, SRSB member

ing into our schools for years. We have the RCMP, we have the Lions Club, we have a whole host of people that come in and do presentations and work with our kids. The things that we look at mainly is how does this support the public school program, how does it fit into what we need to do right now in this school, and how do we help kids be successful? That's kind of the gauge that we use.

"The principals make a lot of decisions around who comes into the schools to do presentations, and sometimes it comes

back to us. Certainly, I was aware that this type of activity was going on, and if there had been an issue with it, from my point of view, we would take another look at it."

Beaton added the board has worked with the Antigonish Women's Resource Center in the Healthy Relationships for Youth for the last five or six years in both Antigonish and Guysborough counties.

"That's a different program, but we've had a working relationship with them for the last five or six years. So it was just a natural evolution of the relationship between ourselves and the women's resource centre that this was another program that they took on."

As for the motion to terminate the program, Beaton said the board has that power, but it would be unusual to do so.

"They would need to direct the superintendent to direct staff to terminate the program. School boards normally allow administrators and educators to make those professional education decisions, and what they (the board) monitors is how their policies are being carried out and how successful our students are at the end of the day."

Beaton added that the Inspire program, as well as the controversial youth health centres, "are valued greatly by students and staff" in the schools they are in.

"Pieces taken out of context

can be very damaging and put them in jeopardy."

Concerns raised

Frank Machnik, member for east Antigonish, said he is concerned about various organizations being permitted into schools.

"It seems (there is) no authority from any particular identity except, possibly, staff and principals."

He also stated that the schools don't need any more "peer councillors" dealing with the children on sensitive issues.

"What we need are professionals. We need doctors, we need psychologists, we need therapists that have certification to be dealing with our youth. This is some serious business when you've got depression, when you've got sexuality problems, when you've got problems with home life—this is not something for a university student to be dealing with."

Machnik added the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre runs some wonderful programs in the community, but bringing this kind of program to youth in schools is "over the top."

Machnik stressed that students in the board are entitled to the best possible programming, and adds they're entitled to "professional services."

"The government, the Department of Health and the Department of Education are spending big bucks to give

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Inspire

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programs to our youth. We don't need peer councillors."

Board member Mike Brown expressed concerns about the program during the recent meeting.

"I've heard concerns from teachers and parents," he said. "From the teachers point of view...they tell me there's just too much curriculum to teach and not enough time."

In light of provincial assessment marks in literacy and innumeracy, Brown said, time in the classroom in of the utmost importance. Machnik also stated concerns about "time on task," and children missing being away from the classroom.

"I don't think there's room for external organizations to be offering programs," Machnik said.

Some parents, he added, have stated to him that they send their children to school to learn academics and not to attend program such as this.

"If this is such an impor-

tant subject or discussion for the children, then I still say it should be in our curriculum and it should be taught by people that are certified through the province as a teacher."

Brown said the board had no involvement when the program was implemented, but he adds he think they should have had some influence in the decision.

"I know, myself, as a board member...had no idea that this program was being offered in the schools. It only came to our attention when one parent wrote an e-mail to the principal of a school and copied board members about this program being offered. It makes me wonder what else is in the schools that we don't know about."

It's important for board members to be informed, he added, so they will be able to answer questions if they receive calls from concerned parents.

"I think all board members should be aware of exactly who is going in the schools and what they are teaching. I still don't have a clear understanding of the Inspire program."

Protocol explained
Chair Mary Jess MacDonald

said the program has come up a number of times around the table, and the board received a presentation about the program from the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre about the program.

"We had some indication from the students themselves; we had indication from the director of programs and services, and now we're going to get another update at the working committee in September."

The program, she added, has been approved by the Department of Education.

"The department looks after the curriculum; we look after how it's delivered."

Concerns from parents and the public, she added, should be directed to the schools.

"Knowing from concerns I've received from parents, 99.9 percent of the time they're resolved at the school before they ever even get to senior administration. That's my experience."