

Motion to deny access defeated

by Heather MacAdam

An at times chaotic public session of the Strait Regional School Board resulted in the continuation of two programs run by the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre and the vice-chair of the board being asked to leave the meeting.

A motion to terminate the services of the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre (AWRC) was brought forward at the meeting by board member Frank Machnik, who expressed concerns with people who are not "professionals" having access to students. The motion was defeated by a 7-4 vote, with Brenda Gillis, Mike Brown and Judy Bernard-Julian supporting Machnik.

Board member Kim Horton was absent from the recent meeting and did not vote.

After the motion was defeated, a verbal clash broke out between Brown and chair Henry Van Berkel over Superintendent Phonse Gillis' report. Brown was asked to leave the meeting and will be required to apologise to the board before returning to committee meetings.

A crowd of about 30 members of the public attended the May 7 meeting, with many looking relieved when the contentious motion was defeated.

Machnik raised concerns about the AWRC after reading about provincial funding received by the Healthy Relationships for Youth (HRY) in the local media. The program is currently in all academies in the district, and Machnik said board members were not



Pictured is a sample of the almost 30 members of the public who attended a recent meeting of the Strait Regional School Board where a controversial motion to terminate the services of the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre was defeated. (Heather MacAdam photo)

made aware the program was being expanded to all schools. Originally, the HRY program began as a pilot in two high schools.

The Inspire program, also run by the AWRC, has been an area of concern for some board members over the past year.

During the meeting, Machnik said the AWRC does "some work that is commendable."

"But they do not, from my vantage point, have the skills, have the professionalism, to deal with our youth on sensitive issues."

A lengthy debate ensued, with Brown, Bernard-Julian and Gillis stating support for ending the board's relationship with the AWRC, and Mary Jess MacDonald, George Kehoe, Clarence Reddick, Rosalee Parker and Van Berkel supporting the centre's programs.

Van Berkel said during the meeting that although this mo-

tion deals with some difficult issues, he did find his decision not to support the motion a difficult one to make.

"I know who's responsible for making this kind of decision, and it's not the Strait Regional School Board, or anybody at this level," Van Berkel said. "Our job is to provide good policy directive to the principals to make sure they are comfortable making good decisions at the school level."

Van Berkel said he has considered the possibility of moving the motion out of order because it would have been asking the board to do something out of their mandate.

"We are a policy governance body - we don't make decisions on a daily basis on items such as these."

During the discussion, Van Berkel asked for additional information on the programs from the superintendent and director of programs and student service Jack Beaton. Brown protested, saying staff members couldn't give information while a motion was on the table, and that information should have been supplied by staff before the most recent meeting. Van Berkel called a five-minute recess to contemplate the issue and decided to allow the staff to speak.

Brown challenged Van Berkel's decision, but was voted down by the board, and staff were given an opportunity to present information.

Beaton read a letter from Anne Blackwood, director English program services for the Nova Scotia Department of Education, who reviewed the HRY program and found that it did meet the requirements of the Health/PDR courses.

Following the meeting, Machnik said he wasn't surprised with the result of the vote.

"I still feel strongly about the issue," he said. "The issue is I want professionals dealing with our youth. I want teachers, I want guidance counsellors, I want doctors, psychologists that are certified."

Machnik said he would be OK with teachers from the Strait teaching these "sensitive issues," because the teacher would be accountable to the board.

"If a parent went after them, we could hold them liable if they gave information out or were discussing things that, of course, weren't appropriate."

If the same thing were to happen with someone from AWRC, Machnik said the board would have no "recourse."

"These people aren't employees of the board."

Peggy Mahon, co-chair of the AWRC board of directors, and executive director Lucille Harper said they were both very relieved that students in the Strait will still have access to HRY and Inspire.

"We've heard nothing but positive comments from the schools and students," Harper said.

Harper said the HRY program is teacher-lead, and in some schools there is a co-facilitator from a community organization such as the Naomi Society, Leaside Transition House or the program co-ordinator from AWRC. The teacher may also have two youth facilitators.

"It's the teacher in the classroom who's actually leading the program, and I would say that the teachers are well trained to be able to deliver those programs."

The Inspire program is currently in four schools, Harper said, and is delivered at different times and in different ways, according to the school's need.

"The staff person from the women's centre is a registered social worker and, in most schools, it's co-facilitated with a public health nurse. I believe social workers and public health nurses are well trained to deliver the program."

Harper said a full presentation was done by the AWRC at the board on June 20, 2007.

"We do try to come on an annual basis, and at that time we defined what the changes in the program had been and that we would be in all 10 schools this year. The fact that this was news didn't make sense to me, given that we had given copies of our report to the board."

The superintendent also expressed his satisfaction that the motion was not passed.

"I'm pleased that the board supported the program because I believe that it's a very good program for the Strait Regional School Board. It's a program that been reviewed by the Department of Education. The testimonials that I have received from principals...tell me this is a good program that's endorsed by the students in their schools and the teachers in their schools."

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