

Strait Area
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School board disbanded

by Dana MacPhail

The Reporter

PORT HASTINGS- Months after demanding amendments to their code of ethics and removing certain powers from the elected representatives, the Minister of Education took the only step left available to her on Monday morning by disbanding the Strait regional school board.

"I don't take this lightly. I don't like to make this decision but I act in the best interests of students in this province, always," Karen Casey said to media after meeting with the board members and advising them of her decision.

Her decision was prompted in part by a letter she received from board chair Henry Van Berkel, who said a failure on the part of the board to discipline Town of Antigonish board member Mike Brown for his behaviour at the May 7 meeting of the board was the final straw.

Following a heated debate on the future presence of the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre in Strait area schools the board moved on to the superintendent's report, usually a straightforward report on activities students are involved in. Brown began to question Gillis on why he did not provide a detailed written report as some superintendents do, and asked how much time he was spending in area schools. Gillis replied that without his calendar he couldn't say for sure but that he has visited three schools in the previous two days and Van Berkel suggested moving the discussion to the next meeting of the board so Gillis could consult his calendar. As the debate continued, Van Berkel told Brown if he continued to interrupt, he would have to ask for an apology or failing that, ask him to leave the meeting.

Brown walked out of the meeting, saying "This is bulls...." and Van Berkel told him he would not be welcomed back without an apology.

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The board chair later found out he would need a motion of the board to discipline Brown and attempted to do so at a special meeting last week prior to the board's working committee session on May 21. The motion, which at the time was vaguely referred to as a motion to send a letter, was defeated in a 6-5 decision.

Members Frank Machnik, Kim Horton, Brenda Gillis, Henry Van Berkel and Clarence Reddick voted in favour of sending the disciplinary letter while Mike Brown, Gerald MacDonald, Francine Boudreau, Rosalee Parker, George Kehoe and Judy Bernard-Julian voted against the motion. South Inverness member Mary Jess MacDonald was not present for the meeting, but during the May 7 meeting, requested that Brown also offer an apology for his use of language before returning to the board sessions.

After Casey's announcement Machnik, the member for East Antigonish, said he was very disappointed in Van Berkel's decision, but also noted he did his part to try to resolve the situation with Brown.

"I voted that he be sent a letter of reprimand. I think that under the circumstances what took place was a very, very heated situation and what [Brown] did wasn't quite correct but under the circumstances..."

When asked if he would reoffer for the seat in the October election, Machnik replied, "I think there's a challenge now. Very much so."

Machnik also complained that the minister spent less than 10 minutes with the board on Monday morning.

"This is not democracy. We didn't even get a chance to speak to her. But of course, that's the history of this board, everything in camera, everything hidden and it will continue. It's getting worse."

"I say this, the individuals who constantly supported the board staff are the ones that are deemed the angels but let's look back to 2000. I hope the public hasn't forgotten what took place in 2000. It was a travesty," Machnik said referring to the financial scandal involving former superintendent Jack Sullivan and director of finances John Cameron.

Machnik said if the minister really wanted to help the board, she should have provided them with a resource around the board table. He contended a lawyer should have been present at board meetings to control the debate, saying "obviously the chair can't do it."

Brown, who said he had no regrets about the outburst and in fact repeated it for television cameras on Monday, also vowed to reoffer in October.

"I wasn't going to make a decision until after the Labour Day weekend but with today's decision, the campaign starts today," Brown said.

Rosalee Parker, the member for East Guysborough, and Mary Jess MacDonald, both former board chairs, agreed with Casey that changes should be made to the Education Act to allow the minister power to discipline certain board members who do not follow the code of ethics.

"I think if we're going to require appropriate behaviour and decorum and respect from our students, that we do have to require that from our members. I feel that strongly," MacDonald said following the announcement.

Parker, who has been a school board member for 23 years, agreed with MacDonald saying she was "terribly disappointed" the board had to be disbanded but supports the minister's decision.

"We were at a stalemate. We needed help," the East Guysborough representative said.

Both MacDonald and Parker said they would reoffer for their respective seats in the October election.

Van Berkel also expressed sadness about the board's dismissal but hopes people will understand that he did what he felt he had to do after discussions with his fellow board members did not convince him the board could work together.

"It's a very difficult decision to make but we have a greater cause to serve here and that's the welfare of students in our area and I felt that it would be best served if the board did not exist," the board chair and West Antigonish member said.

"I did try to preserve the life of this board to the end of its mandate. I hoped we would. I thought we might. I thought the February 25 intervention of the minister perhaps wasn't needed at that time. However, we had difficult circumstances then and when half the powers were removed I certainly thought that our board members would really focus on the job we had to do for our students and that we would not lose focus the way we did."

For his part, Van Berkel said he likely would not run in the next election but hasn't made his final decision. He said there would have to be "a widespread perception in the community that I did the right thing in this circumstance," before he would reoffer.

Gillis and other members of senior staff are set to meet with Dr. Sears this week to learn what he would require of them in the coming months.