

## Northern Lights School Division #113

La Ronge, Saskatchewan

S0J 1L0

January 23, 2017

The following is an attempt to capture the voices of the Northern Lights School Division's Perrins Report advisory panel consultation from January 17, 2017.

While this document is not a transcription of the entire discussion, an attempt was made to describe the actual conversation using the language of the individuals involved.

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### **Ken:**

Northern Saskatchewan is extremely diverse and multicultural. It is referred to as First Nations and Metis, with 87% of our children coming from that background, yet that simple phrase does not do justice to the United Nations diversity and inter-relationship of all of the communities that make up the Northern Lights School Division.

The Northern Lights School Division would appreciate a stronger relationship with the Regional Office and a stronger relationship with the Ministry to garner the necessary support for our students. I'm glad Thomas is here today and looking forward to working closely with our Regional Office to bring more support into the North. It's about providing service to our kids. Each community is so distinct relative to the community 40 miles down the road. The ESSP and Following Their Voices truly is the heart of transformational change in education in Northern Saskatchewan today.

### **Ray**

The sacred relationship in education is between the student and their parents. Parents are empowered in the democracy today and who they want to speak for them. We have to protect democracy. It is about the principles of community education. Some of those principles reflect on the institution while some of them reflect on the people themselves.

We are struggling for our children with the gangs. We are losing our children to gangs and we are losing our children to self-harm. We are losing them to depression. This is where the Northern Lights School Division can do more. Meadow Lake has no involvement with Buffalo Narrows or with La Loche.

It's like a foreign place. I have more to do with what goes on in Athabasca, Sandy Bay and La Ronge than I do with what goes on in Prince Albert, Saskatoon or Meadow Lake. Our children

live in a bubble and that way they are protected from systemic racism. Systemic racism exists in Saskatchewan. When an Aboriginal person was shot on a farm in Saskatchewan and someone said they should have shot them all. Why would that happen if we didn't have systemic racism? Our children face this every day. That is the reality of what we live in. Northern Lights is able to protect our children from that reality. Until our children start going out, then they run into the dark experiences. That keep them in their place. That is the reality that Northern Lights children deal with. That is the reality that this board deals with. We try to give them the mental capability to guide them and protect themselves. Once they are out there, by themselves, they have to fight off the temptation of gangs, the negative peer pressure.

Northern Lights can do more on leadership. We must do more on student performance. And we have done more. We are tracking truancy. We are focused on reading and literacy. We are measuring carefully to allocate our resources properly.

We will also do more with student engagement. We must do more with individual students.

We have a lot of aging infrastructure. No one else is looking at the needs of Northern Saskatchewan. But, even though we have aging infrastructure, the most valuable thing we have in Northern Saskatchewan is our children.

Cooperating across sectors. We need to look at sectors that are important to the kids. We look to justice, social services, housing, policing, and health. We must provide our kids with motivation. We must help them with hopelessness. To help them fight off negative peer pressure. But other sectors must cooperate too. After the shooting in La Loche we saw cooperation and how well it could work. It didn't only happen from south to north. It also happened across the north. Everyone reached out. We showed the culture of Canada. We also showed the culture of Northern Saskatchewan.

**Anita:**

I've lived in La Loche for 39 years. It is just now that we are seeing community members being engaged in education. To come out and vote and talk about what they want for their children. We've spent years engaging people so we can't take away their voice now. That's how they killed health boards, make them appointed and then nobody cares what happens because they have no voice in it. After the last amalgamation in Saskatchewan every new school board had to develop its own culture again. School boards were tied up in doing this and kids were no longer first. And now you wonder why PISA scores are where they are.

I don't like any of the four recommendations. I don't think they're logical. They are not going to help education. People need to have a say in the education of their children and they have a right to have that say. People pay taxes and they have a right to demand that we perform. We need to improve our students' performance. You don't affect change for a child in a board office, you affect change in a classroom.

Government did not save any money amalgamating last time. In fact it is costing more. Ask us as a board for greater accountability and we will deliver it. You are not going to move Stony Rapids any closer to Regina by changing the board structure. It will cost a lot of money to educate children in remote areas no matter what structure you use.

Poverty impacts education. The distance between a child in the South and mainstream society is far greater than any child in the North and mainstream society. Those walls down south are put up so tight and hard you can't break them down. I don't want to see that happen in the north.

There are a lot of good things about La Loche. There is no fear in our community. They will always let you in and they will always listen. The media treats us wrong. To lose that and say that you have a better system, that you know a better way, is wrong.

None of the options work. Saskatchewan is at the bottom of Canada's PISA scores. These proposed changes will lower our scores further. We must focus on delivering education to children.

**Dawn E:**

I was a kid in the North. I was born and raised in the North. I am a proud Métis woman. I want to speak about our staff. What is going to happen to our staff? There has been a lot of talk about centralizing human resources. Centralizing payroll. That would be detrimental if that happens. In the north we must be flexible, serve our staff, and our schools. We are more than just HR people in the North. We know all of our staff. I talk to them. We know their lives. I assist them in any way I can. As a school division we help all of our staff to be successful. That will be lost and gone if we are administered from the South.

Meadow Lake can't even imagine what our people deal with. Most of the other school divisions are unionized. None of our support staff are unionized. What will happen to them? When someone in a union needs a job then our staff will be the first ones laid off.

The majority of our nonteaching staff are Aboriginal and we are the number one employer in the North. What is going to happen to them? They are very concerned with all of this uncertainty. It is very difficult for them. I doubt that those people in Regina that are making these decisions have any idea about the lives that they are affecting in the North.

Regina is a long ways away from Beauval, a long ways away from Sandy Bay. Do they even know how to get to Sandy Bay? Look around the table, you can see, these are the people we represent. I want to make it very clear that there are two separate issues, we have our students but we also have our staff.

**Ray:**

Northern Lights school Division is more than educators. We partner with other agencies such as Kids First and in the Northern Human Services Project. What happens with that?

We struggle with attracting and retaining teachers. If we don't have houses in Northern Saskatchewan for teachers we will be lost. There is a direct connection between houses and teachers.

**Dawn:**

We have 250 housing units across the North. We maintain these and rent them out to our teaching staff at very reasonable rates. We do this so that we can have teachers in the North. Where else would they live? What happens to our houses? Will the government sell those off to make money?

**Ken:**

We tend to self-deprecate in the North. You can hear it around the table. We are apologetic for our student performance. We have no reason to be that way. It is the sense of humility of the people of the North. There is nothing to apologize for. The effort that all of our staff puts in is incredible. To attract and retain staff in the North is very difficult. We still have empty classrooms since September where we could not hire teachers. Everyone in the province has tried to help us. The challenges of the North are extreme. We are pushed to hire people who may not be the best. We then faced the stress of the ordeals that brings as well.

Our challenges are above and beyond anything encountered in southern school divisions. Too many people come to the North to hide. You deal with teacher discipline and we deal with sexual predators. You deal with student attendance and we deal with feral dogs. The dog issue isn't addressed because the wolves fix the problem each winter. But we must apologize if our kids don't attend school regularly. But attendance in many of our schools is connected to weather, isolation and wild animals. I hear about feral dog problems in some communities which are then resolved by the wolves coming through in the depths of winter. Keeping our children safe is always our first priority.

When we look at the long history of Aboriginal people with Europeans we can no longer wonder why they don't trust us. I was told a story about the store in Sandy Bay. The store is not open in Sandy Bay. I can't even get CBC Radio's attention that there is no food in Sandy Bay. The store in Pelican Narrows burned down. People must travel three hours to Flin Flon for groceries. How do people in Sandy Bay get food? There is also no gas station in Sandy Bay.

Yet, I understand that the people in Sandy Bay don't like the store. It has a bad history. An elder told me that when Sask Power had more staff in Sandy Bay white people were allowed to walk into the store to shop while the local people had to stand outside and make purchases at the "Indian window". I understand that this was the practice for years. I was told that feeling still exists today. This experience makes it difficult to trust the school with their children. If Sandy Bay is administered Melfort it will only serve to exacerbate the stress. The Northern Lights School Division builds those relationships with our senior administration on the ground in Sandy Bay and every other community.

**Harry:**

The culture of the North is unique. We have to help each other through extended families. Sandy Bay is on the Churchill River. They built a powerhouse there and they take away our resources and continue to take away our resources.

Our elders have marked the rock paintings as a way of saving this is for our children.

We are finally bringing our culture back into our education and now here we go again to shake things up by restructuring it again.

Come and spend a week with us. See what poverty looks like. Come and see what it is for that child to come to school for that bread, for that toast. Sit beside the child and hear his stomach growl because he is hungry. Poverty has been hit so many times by social services, Justice, education, and it never works. Poverty is still with us. It is the root of our problem. Poverty is systemic.

Every Northern community has a river. Water is life. I'm here to represent those children that don't have a voice. I'm here to represent the disabled. I'm here to represent the alcoholic children. The children of poverty. Can't forget about these people.

Coming to visit La Ronge for one day doesn't cut it. I'm sorry.

**Anita:**

I think this creates a sense of anxiety among people. We don't need any more anxiety in La Loche. Spend a day at the Dene building. Come and see what it's like where people walked the halls and live it every day. Re-living it in their minds every day. We don't need any more anxiety and upset. We need 30 years more of stability. We don't need to test people anymore. We need to let them grow. Let the parents and children build bonds with their school.

The dollars you are going to save in intrinsics are zero. You don't save your money there. Save your money okay in economics. When the bad economic times are over you will have created a whole lot of anxiety that you then must deal with.

**Ray:**

It was almost apartheid in Sandy Bay, where the community was not allowed to go to the power plant. It was brown versus white. That's the kind of history we have to work with.

Yesterday in Buffalo Narrows there was a crime where a SWAT team was mobilized and our schools were in lockdown as houses were being searched. These are our days in the North. I made a call to the principal. I made a call to central office and together we ensured that all children were safe. The timely response is what Northern Lights is about. Dealing with the challenges of being in the north is also what Northern Lights is about. We work in a shifting

environment where anything can happen and does. We are more than education but we still have to remain focused on student outcomes.

Yes we use our third grade reading scores as a barometer. Last year Gordon Denny Elementary School went from 29% of children in grade 3 reading at grade level to 77% in one year. We believe we can bring this change to all of our schools. It is our commitment to your ESSP.

**Dawn:**

English is a second language for many of our people in the north. Parents struggle, and children struggle, and staff struggle. We help them with this in many ways by making phone calls, and writing letters, and communicating for them to the outside. We all help families. Who is going to help? Who will understand? This is just what we do in Northern Lights. I go wherever it is needed. Anita talks about going to people's homes. This is true. We go to people's homes to help them all the time. To help with whatever else is needed. People in Regina have no idea whatsoever.

**Harry:**

In Northern Lights there is a trust that you cannot build overnight. There are values. As Aboriginal people we value what we have. We have learned to be happy with nothing. To say that, and you really think about that, it's hard. You get used to things being taken away. And you learn to adapt. That is one thing that Aboriginal people have learned over 100 years.

We had structure and we functioned. When the government brought us from our trap lines we had mental issues that still burden Aboriginal people today. Suicide is a prime example. We had 13 children in a row kill themselves in Sandy Bay. My father was a school board member at the time. A young man hanged himself outside in a tree. Five and six-year-olds were looking at him as if it were a show. They wouldn't allow him to be cut down for a long time until authorities finally got there. This is very hard to talk about. It affects me. I lived that. I don't know how you people will react to something like that. I can still see that.

**Ken:**

When we look at so many of the social issues that kids face, they're in our schools all the time. It is about our relationships. That sense of family that the school division has is really an extension of the community itself. There is deep poverty in all of our communities across Northern Canada. We know exactly where the hopelessness and despair are coming from. When 15 people are living in a two-bedroom house and if one or two people struggle with addictions then those addictions impact everyone.

Where is the compassion in the South, and across Canada, to truly assist with the social issues that plague Canada's Aboriginal people? This is the foundation for the lack of trust that the North has for the South. When they say that they like, or don't like, what they have in the Northern Lights School Division they still value that sense of family and know that we are there.

**Ray:**

The social issues that Harry was talking about impact everybody. My brother killed himself too and his daughter, my niece, also killed herself last Christmas. So when you talk about spirit. The spirit of the North, we care for our children. We care for our families. It is an issue of extended family. Yesterday we talked and said that we are a big family. Even if you're not part of the family, you are still part of the community. We are diverse and we share with each other. That's the value that the government doesn't see when it starts shifting boundaries. What governments also can't see is the voice that Northern Lights gives Aboriginal people. We have been dependent on everybody else a very long time through colonization.

The North struggles for our voice. Northern Lights is their voice in education. Now we hear that we might be divided up again and have that voice taken away. Combine us with any southern community and we become the minority voice once again. We can't help but think that it's done by design. All of a sudden our communities are disempowered. That feeling of paternalism. If you take that control away from us now you will do even more damage to the communities, more damage to the social issues.

Every family is impacted by self-harm and suicide in Northern Saskatchewan. All the families are impacted. Part of our curriculum is to teach our kids how to stay alive. Each of our communities support one another.

We all live beyond the "buckskin curtain", the 54<sup>th</sup> parallel. The map doesn't hardly extend past PA Park. The South doesn't know, nor care about us, and what happens in Northern Saskatchewan. We must remain connected and not taken apart. Education is all we have, Northern Lights represents that, it gives Aboriginal people hope.

**Harry:**

Northern Lights brings resources to the students, the parents, and the community. They know the culture. They bring the resources. They respect the elders. Northern Lights is large enough to serve everyone. This is why we need to leave Northern Lights as it is.

It hurts to talk to you about this today. Please know that is what it is like to be part of an Aboriginal community. You're not going to learn it here in one day. It has been going on for hundreds of years. The only time that we are equal is when we are going to lose something again. We become equal.

**Anita:**

Every job needs to be filled and every position needs to be filled. Every effort must be made to fill every position and provide service to children. I don't care where you have to go to get them. We need to promote the North. There is nothing wrong with living in the north.

We have created many wonderful teachers who started their careers in the North. Kids that have been highly successful did it through education. Basic education. Only 20% of our kids in

La Loche graduate from high school. I have strong views on what a high school education in the North should look like. Our kids disengage in grade 7 and grade 8. They drop out. They join gangs for affiliation and support. They start a life on welfare. It is a tragic life. It does not have to be.

**Guy:**

We acknowledge that we need to change. Change is good. We are big as we cover half of Saskatchewan but our strength is from being autonomous. To support the North you would leave us intact as we are. We can invoke the change that needs to occur.

**Ken:**

To follow on Anita's comments. Other directors and I are talking about having teachers seconded from the South who want to work in the North but may want to return to their former lives after a couple of years. There is great merit to these conversations. We work hard at serving all of our children well.

As Ben mentioned cycling staff through the North has been wonderful professional development for them to understand and grow in the profession. This again comes down to autonomy and a focus on the needs of Northern Saskatchewan.

If you truly want transformational change to help children, and help Aboriginal children in particular, then support our efforts in the North for the ESSP. We believe there is great merit in these actions. We have seen the change in Gordon Denny School in Air Ronge.

We are apologetic in the North as we dither to try to please government in Regina. Last spring we said that we would stay focused on our children and reading, understanding the critical importance for every child to be literate in order to succeed in school. We already know that focus is paying off for our most vulnerable children. If the government chooses to tip the system over this will all wash away.

**Panel:**

I don't know the North but I am very sensitive to what you were saying. I hear you saying that we need to change some of our processes but we do not need to change governance.

**Anita:**

Everyone in the world aims for under 1% administration and governance cost. And we are there so...

**Ray:**

We need to document the children that drop out between kindergarten and 10<sup>th</sup> grade. We have an obligation to them in the Education Act up to the age of 21. Another item for change, beyond student achievement, is financial and looking at efficiencies. Translating efficiencies

into more programs at the front line. An example such as purchasing supplies among all sectors. There are institutional changes that we can look at.

**Dawn:**

A big change we need is for people in the south to stop believing that they know what is best for people in the North. Because they don't know, and if they want to know they should start asking us. And not like this, they should actually start coming to our communities. And not when there's a big threat. These talks should have started a long time ago.

**Ray:**

Secondments should be part of every teacher's education in Saskatchewan. We need more communication between the schools who know what is working and those who need help. We need to ask them how they communicated with their parents and their community. We want to learn from what's working. Schoolboard exchange would also be very useful.

We have to put more emphasis on being smart in school. We put our emphasis on athletes. But this is a societal change.

An elder once told me that a house is only a building until you get the spirits inside and that's the people. A school is only a building until you get the spirit of the children inside. We are fundamentally responsible for developing that spirit. Until they can run on their own. Protect themselves against the gangs. Make their own decisions. We have a responsibility to do that. That's what Northern Lights does and knows about in Northern Saskatchewan.

**Ken:**

Northern Lights School Division has been an excellent steward of government funds. There is no dark history. There are no incidents of theft, corruption or fraud. It has all been well done and well-documented. It is well-known that Northern Lights provides good government across the North. This is why other sectors rely on Northern Lights for support. The school division has done an excellent job of translating taxpayers' dollars into education for Northern children. Northern Lights is a strong organization and needs to be respected for it.

**Joe:**

There is no indication that these changes will save money or improve education. Because of a lack of government organizations and services in Northern Saskatchewan quite often Northern Lights is it. We do a lot to create partnerships with nongovernment organizations and provide for the North. I wonder, through amalgamation, what will happen with all of that kind of support being provided.

A great barrier for the North is language. If this review were being done in Cree or Dene then I am sure participation would be much stronger. There are other factors that also come into play

like education levels in the North. Internet availability. People in the North also struggle just to get by. Something like this may not be noticed.

If you have appointed boards they are politically polarized. If you have elected boards than their democratically put in place by the constituents.

**Harry:**

Change is good but it needs to be for the better not for the worse. I would like to invite each of you personally to visit my hometown and see how inviting the people are. It's easy to nod your head but I invite you to truly come out.

Another change that needs to occur is the provincial and federal. I have a status card. I represent people whose children are directed to attend the federal school yet I can do nothing to support them. As Northern Lights, a large Northern institution, we can help affect this change.

I don't know who Dan Perrins is but he is probably not First Nations yet he feels free to talk about us. He is suggesting changes which will have great impact on us. In order to understand First Nations you need to have First Nations people involved in this decision.

**Dawn:**

I am sitting here listening to this process and I feel that we are begging. We are begging, "Don't take our school Division, please don't!" Please go and tell the big people in Regina not to take our school Division. How disrespectful. I know it is supposed to be a respectful process but it feels so disrespectful. Because we're sitting here begging. Begging for the kids who don't have a voice. For the staff who don't have a voice. We are begging for our culture. We are begging for our family. We are begging for all of these things that are so near and dear to us. We are begging for our pride. Don't take our pride. What a horrible process!

### **Closing statements from Northern Lights School Division:**

**Dawn K:**

I had the opportunity to travel to Uranium City with our board member in the fall. Our board member knew all of the children. She knew all of the families. She could advocate on behalf of the children for what those needs were. This is what is being said today. This is what is special about board members and governance in the North. They don't just represent a small group of people. They truly know and understand the families that they are serving.

**Joey:**

We have an SCC conference once a year. Our community councils are part of that family that make up the Northern Lights School Division. This is all part of who we are. And how we do the

best possible job for our children. We have a tremendous relationship with our school community councils. We must have our school community councils as a partner to serve the children. We use that platform as part of our governance. We can do everything right at the board table but if it isn't translated back to our communities then what we do is worthless. This is how we reach out to our communities and it is critical to us. Each of us is from our community and we speak that particular language. We are from there. You can't take that away from us.

**Ray:**

The biggest resource we have is our people and our students. I feel the same way Dawn does. I don't trust government. That is just part of me and part of my circumstance. Where I come from. And what I've seen. Nobody has been able to provide equality or equity for my community. In health. In education.

We are part of the economy but it is only to hire people to take care of us in jails. Education is a tool for reconciliation. Do I trust you? Of course not. I won't trust you 'til you prove it. When you can provide that equality, that equity in the system then you will earn the trust of the people of Northern Saskatchewan. Until that happens my children and grandchildren won't trust the system either.

**Harry:**

As I listen here today I am getting flashbacks of the plane coming down the dock. Seeing my friends as they run away. As they cry. They come back with their haircuts. Some don't come back. That's how our people in our area were treated in residential school.

First NORTEP and now the Northern Lights School Division. Attacking our culture for so many years. Don't let that happen. Don't let that happen again. Having my hair cut. Not going to have a say. Ignoring the local grassroots people. That's how I feel, back in 75, watching my family and friends get taken onto the plane and taken away.

I just get a crazy feeling within me that this is going to be taken away. Don't do that. For the love of God don't do that again. To our culture. To our people. That is what this feels like.

Respectfully submitted,

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