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University of Alberta

**Board Member Understandings and Experiences of the  
Development of Local School Board Trusteeship  
in Three Predominantly Native Communities  
in Northland School Division**

by

Nell Jean Irwin



A thesis

submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Educational Administration

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall 1993



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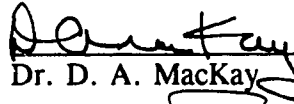
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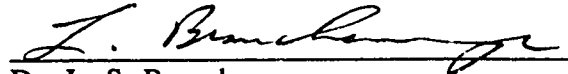
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Date: September 22, 1993

**This work is lovingly dedicated to my family:  
those who have preceded me and those who will succeed me.**

## **Abstract**

The development of local school board trusteeship has a critical connection to the context of decentralised authority for the governance of education systems in predominantly native communities. Accordingly, the researcher investigated the question of the development of trusteeship by conducting open-ended interviews with 19 board members elected to local school board committees, prolonged observation of community life and organisational routines in three predominantly native communities in Northland School Division, and a review and analysis of relevant documentation.

Interpretation of the understandings and experiences shared by board members and the data collected from other sources indicated that interdependent and interactive socioeconomic, political, and demographic forces unique to each community context penetrate organisational relationships and define governance priorities and parameters.

It is claimed that the six forces identified and discussed in this document, namely, (a) history-laden values, (b) powerful perceptions, (c) motivation influences, (d) environmental forces, (e) governance perspectives, and (f) role conceptions, interact and ultimately shape the development of local school board trusteeship. Each of the six forces identified represents one item in a range of phenomena which independently and collectively generate behind-the-scenes behaviours and influence agenda-building activities which ultimately determine governance structures, power and authority relationships, decision-making processes, and organisational priorities.

Consequently, the findings in this study expose the impact of an extensive range of major situational variables which preclude a categorical definition or regulation of the development of trusteeship and emphasise a context-directed process.

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## Table of Contents

Chapter	Page
I. Introduction and Background to the Study . . . . .	1
Introduction . . . . .	1
Significance of the Study . . . . .	2
Research Problem . . . . .	5
Research Questions . . . . .	7
Delimitations . . . . .	10
Terminology . . . . .	11
Limitations . . . . .	11
Assumptions . . . . .	12
II. Related Literature . . . . .	13
Native Governance Developments . . . . .	13
Traditional Forms of Native Governance . . . . .	13
Impact of Policy Initiatives and Legislation . . . . .	15
Indian Control of Indian Education . . . . .	16
The Ghitter Report on Tolerance and Understanding . .	17
Alberta Framework Agreement with the Metis . . . . .	17
"Vision for the Nineties . . . A Plan of Action," September 1991 . . . . .	18
Current Status of Native Educational Governance . . . . .	19
Local Control . . . . .	19
The Context of School Boards . . . . .	23
Nature of the Organisation . . . . .	23
Nature of School Board Relationships . . . . .	26
Board Member Motivation . . . . .	28
Board Member Learning and Development . . . . .	29

Chapter	Page
Models of Native School Boards . . . . .	32
Divisional School Boards in the Northwest Territories . . .	32
Synopsis . . . . .	34
III. Methodology . . . . .	37
The Naturalistic Research Strategy . . . . .	37
Site Identification and Access . . . . .	41
Data Collection . . . . .	43
Observation . . . . .	45
Interviews . . . . .	46
Document Sources . . . . .	48
Data Analysis . . . . .	49
Simultaneous Data Collection and Analysis . . . . .	49
Transcription . . . . .	49
Scanning/Noting . . . . .	50
Unitising . . . . .	50
Developing Categories . . . . .	50
Organisation of Data . . . . .	51
Trustworthiness . . . . .	52
Credibility . . . . .	52
Dependability . . . . .	53
Confirmability . . . . .	53
Transferability . . . . .	54
Ethical Considerations . . . . .	55
IV. Context: Northland School Division . . . . .	57
Introduction . . . . .	57

Chapter	Page
History of Development . . . . .	59
Pre-1961: An Accountability Dilemma . . . . .	59
1961-1965: Establishment of the Division . . . . .	60
1965-1968: Northland School Division Act . . . . .	64
1968-1976: Legislation and Study Group . . . . .	65
1976-1983: Legislation and Investigation . . . . .	68
1983: Present Legislation - Elected Governance . . . . .	73
1986-Present: Direction Setting . . . . .	77
1988-1993: Regionalisation of Delivery of Educational Services . . . . .	79
The Establishment of Area Offices . . . . .	80
Review of the Area Office Concept . . . . .	82
Implications for Change and Adaptation . . . . .	82
1993 Profile . . . . .	83
The Corporate Board . . . . .	83
A Draft Vision Statement . . . . .	84
The Administration . . . . .	85
Focus of the Study . . . . .	86
V. Fort Chipewyan-Athabasca Delta Local School Board Committee . . . . .	89
Understandings and Experiences of Context . . . . .	89
Geographical Location and Setting . . . . .	89
Population . . . . .	90
Local Organisations . . . . .	90
The Cree and Chipewyan Bands . . . . .	90
The Indian Education Authority . . . . .	90
The Metis Association . . . . .	90

Chapter	Page
The Local Advisory Committee . . . . .	91
Perspectives of History . . . . .	91
Provision of Educational Services . . . . .	94
The First Elected L.S.B.C. . . . .	103
The Second Elected L.S.B.C. . . . .	109
<b>Understandings and Experiences of the Athabasca Delta     L.S.B.C. Election in 1992 . . . . .</b>	<b>110</b>
Board Members Motivated by Personal Values and Community Influences . . . . .	110
Heightened Levels of Community Expectations . . . . .	114
Unprecedented Interest in a Competitive Election Process . . . . .	116
Multidimensional Views About Representation . . . . .	117
Eclectic Board Member Learning Strategies . . . . .	119
<b>Understandings and Experiences of Local and Global Forces     Affecting Athabasca Delta L.S.B.C. Development . . . . .</b>	<b>123</b>
History-Laden Values . . . . .	123
Changing Cultural and Family Values . . . . .	124
Changing Community Attitudes Towards the L.S.B.C. . . . .	126
Views About the Isolation Factor . . . . .	128
Community Politics, Division, and Conflict . . . . .	130
Challenges of L.S.B.C. Relationships . . . . .	135
The Influence of Government Restraints and Cutbacks on Resource Levels . . . . .	139
Bureaucratic Barriers . . . . .	139
<b>Understandings and Experiences of the Corporate Board     Structure . . . . .</b>	<b>141</b>
Size and Complexity . . . . .	142

Chapter	Page
Management Strategies . . . . .	143
Change Initiatives . . . . .	145
Understandings and Experiences of Athabasca Delta L.S.B.C.	
Organisation and Practice . . . . .	148
Priorities . . . . .	148
Education . . . . .	148
Community Liaison . . . . .	150
Initiatives . . . . .	152
Community Control . . . . .	152
Training . . . . .	154
Infrastructure . . . . .	154
Increased Involvement in Staffing . . . . .	155
Community Involvement in the School Program . . . . .	156
Discipline Policy . . . . .	156
Hiring of a Counsellor . . . . .	157
Challenges . . . . .	158
Community Control . . . . .	158
Aspirations . . . . .	160
Revival of Cultural Values . . . . .	160
Management of Staffing . . . . .	161
Graduates . . . . .	161
Career Counsellor . . . . .	162
Summary . . . . .	163
VI. Wabasca-Desmarais Community . . . . .	165
Understandings and Experiences of Context . . . . .	165
Geographical Location and Setting . . . . .	165

Chapter	Page
Perspectives of History . . . . .	168
Provision of Education Services . . . . .	170
School Boundaries . . . . .	177
Understandings and Experiences of the Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. Election in 1992 . . . . .	178
A 'Hotly Contested' Election . . . . .	179
Candidacy Motivated by Desire to Be Part of the Education Process . . . . .	179
Multiperspectives of Community Expectations of Board Members . . . . .	181
Quest for Ethnic Acceptance and Cultural Understanding . . . . .	184
Individual and Collective Board Member Learning and Development Priorities . . . . .	185
Understandings and Experiences of Local and Global Forces Affecting Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. Development . . . . .	190
Levels of Political Activity . . . . .	190
The Challenge of Ethnic Understanding and Cultural Acceptance . . . . .	191
The Complexity and Range of Community Attitudes . . . . .	195
A Thrust for Change . . . . .	198
A Micro School Division . . . . .	205
Understandings and Experiences of the Corporate Board Structure . . . . .	207
A Potential for Resourcing Inequity . . . . .	208
Management Strategies . . . . .	210
The Policy Process . . . . .	212
Advocacy of Structural Change . . . . .	213
Understandings and Experiences of Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. Organisation and Practice . . . . .	216

Chapter	Page
Education Priorities . . . . .	216
Discipline Policy . . . . .	217
Recognition of Student Achievement . . . . .	218
Interaction with Parents . . . . .	218
Community Education . . . . .	219
Decision-Making Authority . . . . .	221
Summary . . . . .	222
VII. Atikameg-Sovereign Local School Board Committee . . . . .	224
Understandings and Experiences of Context . . . . .	224
Geographical Location and Setting . . . . .	224
Provision of Educational Services . . . . .	226
Early Parental Involvement in Education . . . . .	229
The School Board Concept . . . . .	230
School Priorities . . . . .	231
Understandings and Experiences of the Atikameg-Sovereign L.S.B.C. Election in 1992 . . . . .	233
"Half" the Community Ran for Election . . . . .	233
Multiperspectives of the Election Process . . . . .	234
Board Members Motivated by Quest for Better Education . . . . .	236
Expectations of Board Members Generated by Educational Values . . . . .	239
An On-the-Job Approach to Board Member Learning and Development . . . . .	241
Understandings and Experiences of Local and Global Forces Affecting Atikameg-Sovereign L.S.B.C. Development . . . . .	244
Community Apathy . . . . .	244
Teacher Attitudes . . . . .	245

Chapter	Page
Fragmented Cultural Values . . . . .	246
Community Factions, Distractions, and Politics . . . . .	249
Cultural Change . . . . .	251
Delimited Horizons . . . . .	253
Understandings and Experiences of the Corporate Board Structure . . . . .	254
'Big Board' Management Strategies . . . . .	255
Policy Development . . . . .	258
Understandings and Experiences of Atikameg-Sovereign L.S.B.C. Organisation and Practice . . . . .	259
Struggles to Achieve a Meeting Quorum . . . . .	260
A Collaborative Approach to Problem Solving . . . . .	262
Board-School Interface . . . . .	265
Involvement with Parents . . . . .	268
Management Strategies . . . . .	269
Summary . . . . .	272
VIII. Findings and Discussion . . . . .	274
Introduction . . . . .	274
Findings . . . . .	275
Context-Specific Realities . . . . .	275
Winds of Change . . . . .	275
Turbulent Times . . . . .	279
Advocacy of Governance Restructuring . . . . .	282
Quest for Community Control of Education . . . . .	286
Discussion . . . . .	291
History-Laden Values . . . . .	291



Chapter	Page
Powerful Perceptions . . . . .	293
Motivation Influences . . . . .	294
Environmental Forces . . . . .	294
Governance Perspectives . . . . .	296
Role Conception . . . . .	299
Summary . . . . .	300
<b>IX. Overview and Reflections . . . . .</b>	<b>302</b>
Overview . . . . .	302
Reflections . . . . .	304
Collaboration . . . . .	306
Political Party Politics . . . . .	307
Incremental Approaches . . . . .	309
Continuity . . . . .	310
Costs . . . . .	311
Budget Control . . . . .	312
Regional Boundaries . . . . .	313
Formalisation . . . . .	315
Concluding Note . . . . .	316
<b>References . . . . .</b>	<b>317</b>
<b>Appendices:</b>	
1. Letter to Superintendent, Northland School Division, Requesting Approval to Attend Education Committee Meeting . . . . .	329
2. Letter of Thanks to Chairman of the Education Committee, Northland School Division . . . . .	331
3. Supporting Statement for Recommendation by Education Committee to Corporate Board for Applicant to Undertake Study in Northland School Division . . . . .	333

	Page
4. Letter of Approval to Conduct the Study from the Corporate Board of Trustees . . . . .	335
5. Letter of Thanks to Superintendent . . . . .	337
6. Letter from Superintendent re Contacting Local School Board Committees to Gain Access . . . . .	339
7. Letters to Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent Submitting a Tentative Plan for the Proposed Study . . . . .	341
8. Sample Letter to Chairman, Local School Board Committee, Regarding Proposed Study . . . . .	345
9. Sample of Personal Letter to Interviewees . . . . .	348
10. Sample Interview Guide . . . . .	350
11. Sample of Letter of Thanks to Local School Board Committees . . . .	352

**List of Figures**

	<b>Page</b>
1. Northland School Division Organisational Management Chart . . . . .	8
2. Map of Northland School Division . . . . .	42

## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction and Background to the Study**

#### **Introduction**

In recent years policy and practice in a number of countries, namely, Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand (Baker, 1991; Christie, 1986; Dacks, 1981, 1990; McBeath et al., 1983; McCoy, 1991; N.I.B., 1988a, 1988b, 1988c; Power, 1989), have supported the concept of localised management of education systems by indigenous peoples. Processes adopted by a number of developing countries to decentralise education systems have been explored in some detail by Rondinelli (1981, 1983); Rondinelli, Middleton, & Verspoor (1990); and Hanson (1986, 1989). In Canada this global trend to decentralisation is reflected in the public policy developed by the National Indian Brotherhood (1972), which articulated plans to accelerate the devolution process of Indian control of First Nations Schools (DIAND, 1982, p. 133).

The trend to decentralisation of education is not unique to indigenous peoples. According to Brown (1992), Swanson (1989), and Mojkowski (1991), the devolution of authority from a higher level of government such as a federal or state authority to a lower organisational level such as local school boards requires a restructuring of educational governance with an emphasis on parental involvement. Further, Brown suggested that "the move to localisation may imply a shift in priorities away from the value of equality as legislated by central governments and toward the value of quality education as defined by local groups such as governing school boards" (p. 3). Aoki (1973; cited in King, 1981) identified this phenomenon as "a process of devolution—not just decentralization, but complete freedom from the centralised bureaucracies that are characteristic of Canadian education" (p. 56).

Although an increasing number of native communities are assuming responsibility for their education systems, recent research conducted on the impact of

community-based leadership (Clintberg, 1987; King, 1981; Matthew, 1990; Reiter, 1990; Wall, 1987; Ward, 1986) revealed perceptions of localised control which represent little more than pseudo colonialism. Nearly two decades ago Urion (1975) sketched the following scenario:

The meanings that have attached themselves to the term 'local control' are so varied and so diffuse that the term—which should signify one of the most progressive developments in this century in native education—often means nothing at all. . . . Despite well-intentioned efforts to institute some decision-making machinery at a local level under the rubric of the term, there are many incidents of self-seeking individuals having made personal, not societal, profits. . . . The cliché and its sometime homonym native involvement are used to masquerade the familiar concomitants of native education, colonialism, and paternalism. (n.p.)

A decade later Kirkness (1985) stated: "The [Indian Control of Indian Education] policy has now been in existence for twelve years. While we acknowledge that progress has been made, we must also state that the desired outcome is far from realization" (p. 4). Other writers (Jules, 1988; King, 1981; Pauls, 1984; Power, 1989) identified the lack of expertise, models, and training opportunities for native people elected or appointed to leadership positions as major problems associated with inert localised decision making and management at the local community level.

This study explores the understandings and experiences of elected local school board members regarding ways in which local school board trusteeship is developing in three predominantly native school communities within one native-controlled school jurisdiction.

### **Significance of the Study**

As suggested by Power (1989), there is a democratic international movement in developed countries to grant more autonomy and independence to indigenous people, enabling them to develop educational structures which reflect their unique cultural settings and aspirations (p. 49). Concomitant with this trend is evidence of increasing individual and collective endeavour by indigenous peoples themselves in grasping the

nettle of leadership of their own education systems (Armstrong, 1987; Barman, Hebert, & McCaskill, 1987; Indian Nations at Risk, 1991; Jules, 1988; Kipohtakaw Education Centre, 1987a, 1987b, 1987c; Kirkness, 1985, 1992; N.I.B., 1972, 1988a, 1988b, 1988c). As emphasised by Kirkness (1985), "It is up to us, the Indian people of this country, to ensure our future through our own educational design, a future based on our reality. Only then can we take our rightful place among the nations of our land" (p. 9). Therefore, this study, which focuses on school board member perspectives of ways in which the development of local school board trusteeship is taking place in predominantly native communities, has both theoretical and practical significance. Four main significances are apparent. First, it is intended that the research will contribute to knowledge about current challenges confronting local community governance of schools from the perspective of local school board members. During the 1960s and 1970s a number of writers promoted research interest in local community and school district governance patterns (Boyd, 1976; Cistone, 1975; Coleman, 1974; Iannascone & Lutz, 1970; Kerr, 1964; McCarty & Ramsey, 1971; Zeigler & Jennings, 1974). Although legislative processes, decentralisation policies, and socioeconomic political forces have significantly influenced the role of school board members since that era, relatively few studies based on board member perspectives of the development of trusteeship have been identified (Institute of Educational Leadership, 1986; Muth & Azumi, 1987). A review of more recent related scholarship revealed that Griffin (1988), Hughes (1991), Kask (1990), and Tallerico (1991a, 1991b) explored various aspects of local school board member development in nonaboriginal contexts.

The second significance of this study is that it focuses on the development of local school board trusteeship; specifically, from the perspectives of local school board members in isolated and predominantly native communities. In 1981 King related problems encountered by a native board of trustees during the implementation

phase of local control, Brady (1989) examined the impediments to native representation on provincial boards in Ontario, and Wall (1987) investigated decision-making processes adopted by a Corporate Board of Trustees in a predominantly native jurisdiction. However, according to Indian Nations at Risk (1991), "Native political and economic structures, educational needs, and mores (such as traditional beliefs and cultural and social practices) are constantly being reshaped. Moreover, there is a great contrast between rural and urban life among the same people" (p. 4). Further, Newton and Newton (1992) claimed that 'threats' to quality of life and effective schooling in sparsely populated areas are well known. Much less well known are the opportunities in such contexts for uniquely rewarding experiences for the whole community" (p. 9). For this reason, the researcher contends that the stories of administrative, educational, and political triumphs and challenges related from the perspectives of local school board members in a predominantly native school division may contribute significantly to the acquisition of knowledge which will guide future development and direction of local school board trusteeship.

The third main significance of this study considered from a contextual perspective is that the findings may contribute in some small way to knowledge pertinent to the study of leadership (Anson, 1992; Immegart, 1988; Sergiovanni, 1992). It was claimed by Immegart that "it is curious that students of leadership have tended to avoid studying actual unfolding situations. . . . More studies of actual situations are needed" (p. 268). In this respect, the findings of the study may assist in fulfilling a critical need emphasised variously in a number of studies (Jules, 1988; Manuel, 1974; N.I.B., 1988) for models of native educational leadership.

A pervasive and fourth significance of the study is that of the researcher's personal and professional experience in this field of education. The investigator was born and educated in a small isolated community and has worked extensively as an educational administrator with isolated communities of indigenous peoples in Australia

and central Pacific regions. The researcher contends that a significant contribution to knowledge can be made to this field of education by listening to and recording the personal experiences and understandings of a relatively understudied group of key players: local school board members in isolated, predominantly aboriginal communities. Consequently, the findings of this study should be of interest to local board members, practising administrators, and policy architects involved in the development of localised management of education systems by indigenous peoples.

### **Research Problem**

But, we have learned that real excellence cannot be imposed from a distance. Governors don't create excellent schools; communities—local school leaders, teachers, parents, and citizens—do. (Alexander, 1986, p. 203)

This observation projects a directional shift in emphasis from centralised bureaucratic control towards a decentralisation of decisions about education. The implications of such a trend include an unprecedented change in the parameters of parental and community involvement in the education process. Seemingly, in response to this dynamic and rapid social change and subsequent institutional challenge, there is a tacit expectation that human talents, expertise, and energy will concomitantly emerge in communities to assume decision-making authority which will provide high-quality education. In theoretical and in practical terms, this supposition evades a major problem; namely, the question of how people who volunteer their time and energy to serve on local school boards understand and experience the development of local school board trusteeship in their own community contexts.

In this predominantly native context, how can local leaders find ways to develop education systems which build bridges of understanding between the often separate realities of native people and the wider society? More than a decade ago, King (1981) stated that "there is little documentation of the processes or problems in the



relatively few cases of communities assuming local control of schools which are already in existence and have institutional histories as organizations within a centralized bureaucracy" (p. 57).

It is recognised by the researcher that existing knowledge of school board member development in nonaboriginal contexts may assist to guide evolutionary forms of aboriginal trusteeship. In a similar vein, Tallerico (1991) contended that "the importance of continuing investigation into this school board member development arena rests on the premise that who these individuals are, what they bring with them and how they develop over time can be critical variables in local education policy-making processes" (p. 94). Further, Union (1975) suggested a need to link the promotion of decision-making power at the local community level to the recognition of and attention to the diversity of communities within large school systems:

The most crucial area about which the term [local control] is bandied is probably that of the administration of schools. The large school jurisdictions in the Prairie Provinces (e.g., Frontier in Manitoba, Northland in Alberta) . . . effectively preclude de facto local control. During the past year there have been several commissioned or legislative formulae put forward to bring some measure of decision making to communities. The universal failure of the formulae is in their neglecting to take into account the fact that each large school system addresses a complex of very diverse communities. We have not defined a level of generalization for the enunciation of principles that will address that diversity. (n.p.)

As a guiding principle in this investigation, the researcher suggests that the forces aligned to contextual influences such as history, language, and culture may significantly impact upon the processes through which local board trusteeship develops in predominantly native communities because "the task challenging Native communities is to retain their distinct cultural identities while preparing members for successful participation in a world of rapidly changing technology and diverse cultures" (Indian Nations at Risk, 1992, p. 1). The challenge of this objective prompts the researcher to investigate the research problem within the unique contextual influences inherent in each predominantly native school community.

### **Research Questions**

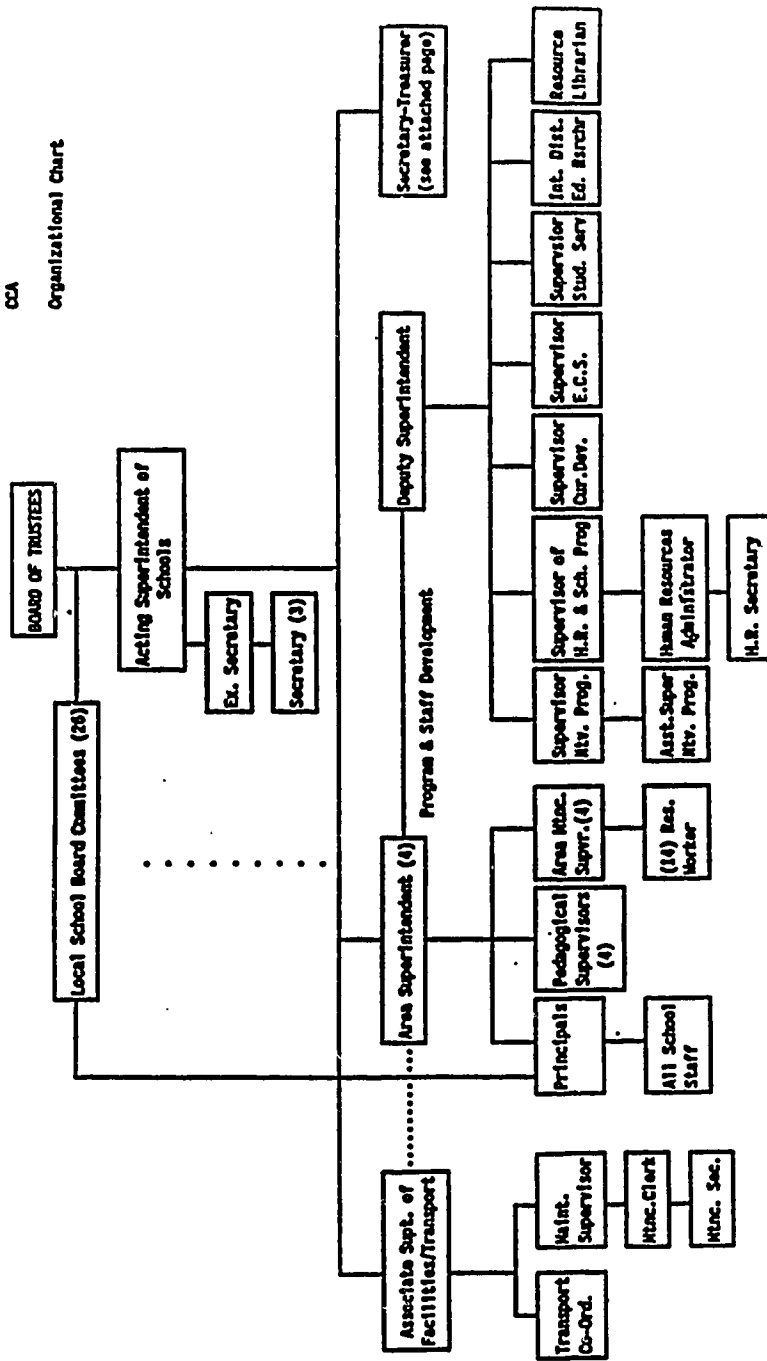
The problem was researched through an exploration of the understandings and the experiences of local school board members in three geographically isolated school communities in Northland School Division, which provides educational services to diverse and highly complex populations of native ancestry.

Northland School Division is governed by a Corporate Board of Trustees which is comprised of 25 community-elected chairmen of Local School Board Committees (hereinafter referred to as L.S.B.C.). The Corporate Board of Trustees, which is assisted by a large administrative support staff, is responsible for the delivery of educational services to 25 largely nonstatus native communities in northern Alberta. Northland School Division employs one superintendent, four area superintendents, 25 school principals, 202 teachers, and 164 paraprofessional staff. The organisational management chart (see Figure 1) is currently being revised to incorporate the significant changes proposed to the governance structure during the Corporate Board meeting held July 26, 1993. These changes included a reduction of Area Office support from four Area Offices to three and some changes in the designation of schools to the three respective areas. Governance of the division is guided by the following broad policy statement.

In recognizing that the school exists as an integral part of the community and cannot be separated from it, Northland School Division believes that the success of the school program will depend largely upon the effectiveness of parents, students, and staff working towards common goals. (Northland School Division, n.d., p. 1 of 8)

Fundamental to the realisation of this objective is the development of trusteeship. In order to investigate the development of L.S.B.C. trusteeship, the researcher visited three communities in Northland School Division and listened to the stories of local school board members to discover some answers to the following research question:

CCA  
Organizational Chart



..... = Communication Line  
 ----- = Reporting Line

S.N. No. 16541/90 - August 24, 1990

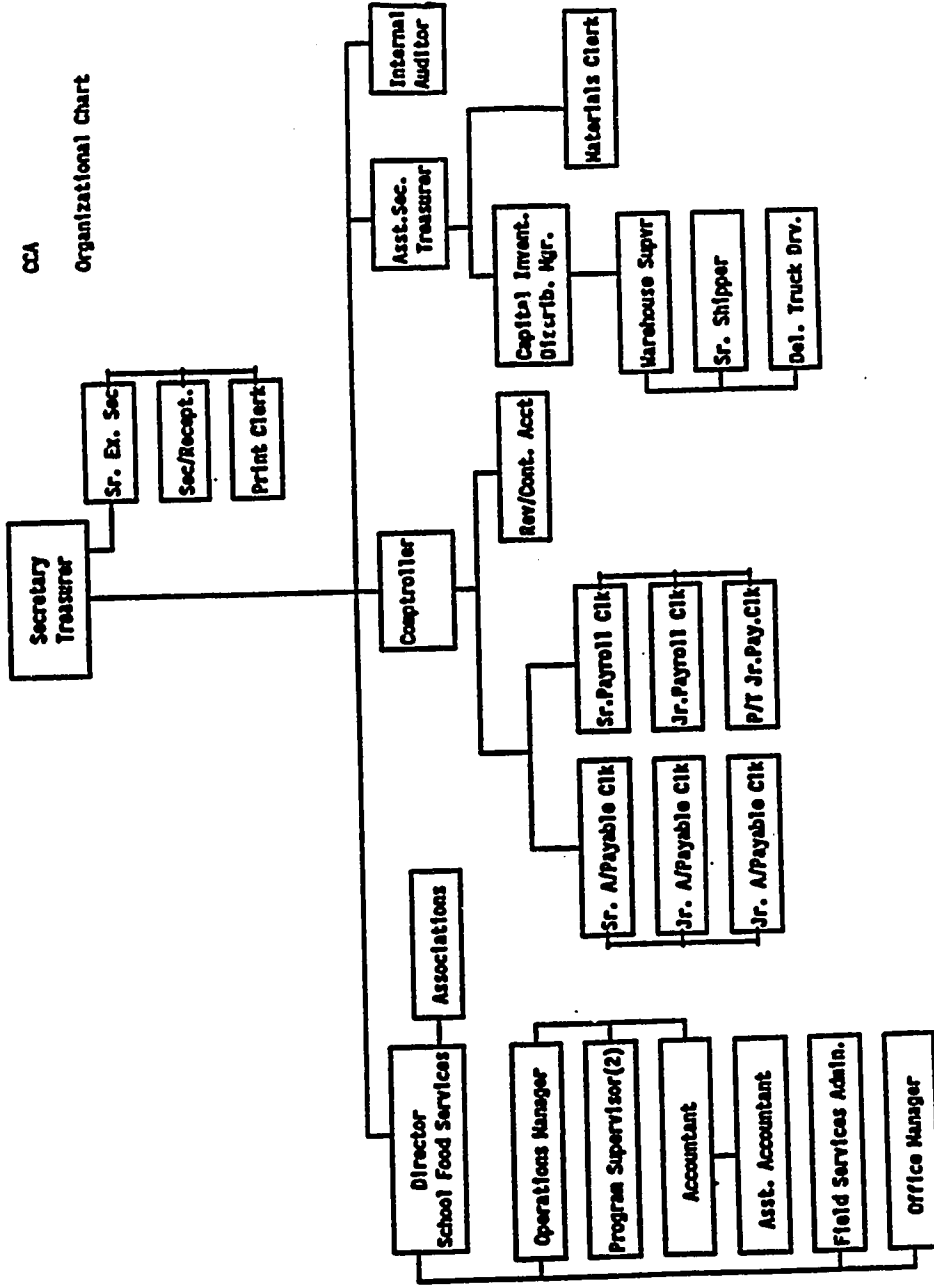


Figure 1. Northland School Division organisational management chart.

What are the understandings and experiences of local school board members about the processes through which local school board trusteeship is developing in three predominantly native communities in Northland School Division?

A number of more specific questions addressed the following objectives:

1. to discover and describe the understandings and experiences of local school board members about the characteristics which determine the contextual uniqueness of each community;
2. to discover and describe the understandings and experiences of local school board members about the processes aligned to their election to the L.S.B.C. in 1992;
3. to discover and describe the understandings and experiences of local school board members about local and global forces which impact upon the development of local school board trusteeship;
4. to discover and describe the understandings and experiences of local school board members about the Corporate Board governance function; and
5. to discover and describe the understandings and experiences of local school board members about L.S.B.C. organisation and practice.

### **Delimitations**

This study was delimited to

1. the exploration, analysis, and interpretation of the understandings and experiences of local school board members in three school communities in one predominantly aboriginal school jurisdiction;
2. the discovery and the description of the experiences and understandings of local school board members within their respective school-community contexts, during a five-month period from February to June 1993; and

3. a case-study methodology. There is a need to explore the process of local school trusteeship development within the respective community contexts within the Northland School Division jurisdiction. It is considered important to discover 'how' and 'why' board members understand and experience the development of local school board trusteeship and to collect as much information as possible to try to make sense of what is happening within the context of a wider governance structure—Northland School Division.

### **Terminology**

In this study the terms *native* and *aboriginal* are used interchangeably to encompass (a) the global indigenous peoples generically referred to, and (b) the wide range of aboriginal peoples specifically referred to in the sample across three communities in northern Alberta. These include Indians (status or nonstatus), Metis, aboriginals, and native peoples. The terms *trustee* and *school board members* are used interchangeably in this study.

### **Limitations**

The study was limited by

1. the willingness of the participants who volunteered to share their experiences and their understandings with the researcher, and their ability to recall events;
2. the understandings and experiences conceptualised and shared by the voluntary participants during the data-collection period;
3. the methodology used—one case study with multiple units of analysis. Other modes of inquiry such as action research, interpretive interactionism, and policy analysis may have produced different insights into the development of local board trusteeship in a predominantly native jurisdiction;

4. the period of time in which data were collected, which was limited by organisational convenience, co-operation, availability of participants, and the cost of the data-collection process; and
5. the skill and the knowledge of the researcher in developing a climate of trust and co-operation, conducting interviews that were open ended, analysing data responsibly, and representing the understandings of participants in their own terms in the research findings.

### **Assumptions**

The proposed study was undertaken on the basis of the following assumptions:

1. It was assumed that the research orientation of the study was appropriate for the purposes of the study.
2. It was assumed that sufficient data would be collected during the period of time in which the study was conducted to reveal significant understandings and experiences of local board members about trustee development.
3. In keeping with the interpretive paradigm, it was assumed that there were multiple realities and that each participant would be prepared to share individually constructed and unique realities which would enlarge an incomplete picture of local school board trusteeship development.
4. It was assumed that the researcher and the participants in the study would interact to influence one another in a way which would achieve an interconnectedness between the researcher and the researched.
5. It was assumed that the researcher would be able to utilise the thick descriptions of the infinite number of perspectives of participants, speculate on observations made, and report in a manner which enabled readers in other contexts to effect transferability of the findings.

## **Chapter II**

### **Related Literature**

What does the research tell us about the traditional forms of native governance, the impact of policy initiatives and legislation, the current status of native educational governance, and the context of school boards? How can this knowledge base help us to understand the development of local school board trusteeship in a predominantly native school jurisdiction?

The purpose of this chapter is to present a brief review of the literature which appears to inform the study at this point in time. Specifically, this review (a) considers native governance developments, (b) investigates the current status of native governance, (c) examines the context of school boards from a global perspective, and (d) reviews models of native school boards.

### **Native Governance Developments**

#### **Traditional Forms of Native Governance**

Before we had our schools, our mothers and fathers were our teachers, our Elders were our professors. (Elder Smith Atimoyou, personal communication, April 21, 1993)

As a prerequisite to interpreting the perspectives described by predominantly native trustees on the development of local school board trusteeship, the researcher first explored the traditional indigenous view of native governance within a cultural and historical context. What, then, are these traditional ways of governance, of knowing/learning, of decision-making processes, of family kinship; and do these cultural traits influence governance practices today?

According to Malloch (1984):

In the traditional way of life people governed themselves largely in accordance with the laws of nature which had been known to them as a result of living on the land for generations. At the same time social order



and the survival of people were ensured through harmony and order not only in the relationships amongst [themselves] but also in relationships between the [people] and the land and the spiritual world. (p. 13)

This communitarian approach to governance affirmed law and order as a learned behaviour instilled through practical lessons and spiritual experiences (Armstrong, 1982; Jules, 1988; Kirkness, 1985; Manuel & Posluns, 1974), "a natural process occurring during every day activities . . . ensuring cultural continuity and survival of the mental, spiritual, emotional and physical well-being of the cultural unit and its environment" (Armstrong, 1987, p. 13).

The historical development of native governance based on autonomy and consensus was, in Manuel and Posluns' view (1974), influenced by extended family relationships "in a society where all are related" (p. 7). Further, it was noted that Elders play an important role as teachers in transmitting values such as co-operative behaviour in the interests of the development of a cohesive community (Jules, 1988); the importance of the development of the whole person was emphasised through teachings which were often shared in story telling; and traditional education was inextricably linked with economics. Learning was for living—for survival (Kirkness, 1992).

According to Malloch (1984), leaders were not appointed through a formal selection process, but they emerged from the natural order of the community as people who attracted followers (p. 13). They were people of integrity, honesty, and respect (Jules, 1988). It was noted by Deloria and Lytle (1984) that, "traditionally, chiefs (leaders) possessed authority on the basis of influence (charisma) and continued efficacy" (p.10). Although this may be translated in a nonnative context as power and hierarchy, it was clearly explained by Manuel and Posluns (1974) that the role of the chief is to speak the mind of the people, not be the mind. "A leader who stands no taller than the rest of his people stands in the centre of a circle and speaks the voice of the minds and souls he hears around him" (p. 246). The internal tradition of every

tribe in deciding upon a course of action required direct involvement with the people and consensus of the whole group in decision making. The means of coping with nonconsensus was to leave the decision unmade. In the case of disagreements, dissenting leaders, their families, and followers would move elsewhere in the tribal territory to maintain political consensus in both communities (p. 122).

Kirkness (1992) described early forms of native educational governance accordingly:

Long before Europeans arrived in North America, Indians evolved their own form of education. It was an education in which the community and the natural environment were the classroom, and the land was seen as the mother of the people. Members of the community were the teachers, and each adult was responsible for ensuring that each child learned how to live a good life. Central to the teaching was the belief in the sacred, the Great Spirit. (p. 5)

In reflecting on the origins of native governance, is it reasonable to assume that the task of developing education systems which reflect cultural priorities and wider organisational objectives may be guided by traditional ways of knowing the needs and goals of the community and the practice of political consensus? In 1977 Berger claimed that "in reality Native people continue to adapt and change, and yet continue to incorporate many traditional ways into their lives. . . . The structure of leadership today can be seen to be continuous with traditional ways" (p. 99).

### **Impact of Policy Initiatives and Legislation**

A number of significant changes have occurred during the last two decades due to initiatives exercised by native people themselves and also through policy initiatives and government legislation (Ghitter, 1984, 1987, 1991; DIAND, 1982; Green, 1990; Kirkness, 1985, 1992; N.I.B., 1972, 1988a, 1988b, 1988c; Tanguay, 1984; Ward, 1986). What are the policy initiatives and legislation which may in some way influence the experiences and understandings of participants in this study regarding the development of local school board trusteeship in three communities in northern Alberta?

**Indian control of Indian education.** A policy statement entitled *Indian Control of Indian Education* initiated by the National Indian Brotherhood (1972) and implemented in 1982 (DIAND) recognised that the responsibility for educating native children should rest with parents and elders who understand the culture. The policy stated, in part:

Indian parents must have full responsibility and control of education. The Federal government must adjust its policy and practices to make possible the full participation and partnership of Indian people in all decisions and activities connected with the education of Indian children. This requires determined and enlightened action on the part of the Federal government and immediate reform, especially in the following areas of concern: responsibility, programs, teachers and facilities. (N.I.B., p. 3)

This policy development was widely promoted by writers who variously claimed that the answers to questions of native education must come from the people themselves (Barman et al., 1987; Coburn, 1985; Jules, 1988; Kirkness, 1985, 1992; N.I.B., 1988; Richardson & Richardson, 1986).

Although the Indian control of Indian education policy (N.I.B., 1972) referred specifically to status (treaty) Indians, it was generally believed that the principles of parental responsibility and local control as well as relevant curriculum outlined in the policy were the basis of a meaningful and effective education for all aboriginal peoples. Kirkness (1992) claimed that recent developments in governance arrangements have been propelled by the goals and principles of Indian control of Indian education.

As articulated in the policy statement *Indian Control of Indian Education*, "a watershed document in the history of Indian education policy making" in Canada, the challenge of First Nations people is clear. . . .

Our aim is to make education relevant to the philosophy and needs of Indian people. We want education to give our children a strong sense of identity with confidence in their personal worth and ability. We believe in education:

- . . . as a preparation for total living;
- . . . as a means of free choice of where to live and work;
- . . . as a means of enabling us to participate fully in our own social, economic, political and educational advancement. (p. 2)

**The Ghitter Report on Tolerance and Understanding.** At a provincial level, a further development in native education emanated from the publication of the 1984 Ghitter Report on Tolerance and Understanding. This report, which assessed the need for a thorough review of native education in Alberta, stated in part:

Our Native youth are being treated as second-class citizens by our educational systems.

. . . Achievements and new directions are becoming more and more evident in Native education in the Province of Alberta.

. . . However, there is much to be done to redress the neglect, ill-conceived policies, and paternalistic approach that has for too long symbolised the state of Native education in the Province of Alberta.

. . . It is time for action, not for yet another study. (p. 116)

As reported by Kirkness (1992), a Native Education Project Team was established to formulate policy which would address problems identified in the Ghitter Report. The diverse needs of native communities assessed reflected the different needs of urban and rural communities, of different linguistic groups, and of varying cultural backgrounds. Consequently, it was realised that decentralised programs based on input from the different communities would be more effective than a single policy implemented centrally. Accordingly, the key theme of the policy was to be a partnership between native peoples and the local school systems to assess needs and to plan and implement programs at the local level. Subsequently, the 1987 Native Education Policy Statement by the government of Alberta recognised the importance of a government-wide approach to building a multicultural society and developing excellence of opportunity for native students. Embodied in the policy statement mandate was a key theme—to provide opportunities for native people to help guide and shape the education of their children (pp. 72-73).

**Alberta framework agreement with the Metis.** A further encouragement to trustees of native education occurred in 1988 when the Alberta government signed a Framework Agreement with the Metis Nation of Alberta. This agreement initiated a

mutual process for promoting economic, social, and educational development and is unique in Canada.

2.1 The objectives of this agreement are to:

- 2.1.1 promote joint planning and joint action between Alberta and the Association in the following areas:
- i) Education/Advanced Education/Career Development and Employment;
  - ii) Family and Social Services;
  - iii) Forestry, Lands, and Wildlife;
  - iv) Economic Development and Trade;
  - v) Municipal Affairs.
- 2.1.2 strengthen multi-departmental co-ordination within the government of the Province of Alberta.
- 2.1.3 pursue maximum and effective utilization of existing programs. (p. 1)

The agreement signalled the commitment of the political will of the government of Alberta to work with the Metis Nation of Alberta and assist in its determination to break new ground towards achieving its primary goals of self-sufficiency and self-determination. It is a legally empowered, consultative mechanism that enables the Metis people to participate in the decision-making process in a meaningful way with the provision of funding to support initiatives (Metis Nation of Alberta Association, n.d., p. 3).

**"Vision for the Nineties . . . A Plan of Action," September 1991.** Priorities in the Minister of Education's 1991 *Vision for the Nineties . . . A Plan of Action* include the vision of "Native Children Achieve Success in School: Our Native students must be challenged to excel and achieve their best." The key areas identified for improvement include those of "increased Native involvement":

- jurisdictions should increase Native involvement in the education of their children.
- school jurisdictions should increase involvement of Native parents and other Native people in education programs and in the operation of schools that serve Native students. (p. 15)

What impact do these policy objectives and agreements have on the development of local school board trusteeship in predominantly native communities today?

### **Current Status of Native Educational Governance**

The evolution of aboriginal education systems is well documented in the literature (Alberta Education, 1987; Bezeau, 1989; Cardinal, 1977; Indian Nations at Risk, 1991; Ward, 1986) and is largely characterised by dependency on government control. However, the thrust of policy and practice aligned to major shifts in political thought during the last two decades has prompted unprecedented action by the various indigenous peoples of *Canada* (Alberta Education, 1987, 1991; Green, 1990; N.I.B., 1972, 1988a, 1988b, 1988c; Ward, 1986), *United States* (Charleston & King, 1992; Indian Nations at Risk, 1991; McBeath et al., 1983; McCoy, 1991), and *Australia and New Zealand* (Baker, 1991; Darvell, 1990; Graham, 1986). What, then, is this action being taken by indigenous peoples to influence educational policy and practice so as to fulfil unique community needs and wider societal objectives in an increasingly interdependent world? The literature suggested that a diversity of localised governance patterns is evolving within a global trend of decentralisation.

### **Local Control**

The assumption of local control of education evolved following the articulation of the N.I.B. (1972) policy statement: *Indian Control of Indian Education*. In adopting this policy for implementation, the *Indian Education Paper - Phase 1* (DIAND, 1982) stated: "With the realization of the inherent desirability of parental responsibility and local control, our Department encourages Indian control of Indian education" (p. 4). This initiative accelerated action by native communities to establish local education systems. According to Kirkness (1992):

Since the policy of *Indian Control of Indian Education* was adopted in 1973, the number of federal schools has declined dramatically, as bands have assumed responsibility for these schools. . . . In 1975 there were 53 band schools; by 1983 the number had increased to 187. Currently there are 326 band schools as compared to 52 federal schools. (p. 1)

In 1991 MacPherson provided the 1990-91 enrolment statistics for the four types of schools attended by First Nations students:

Federal schools	8,055	8.7%
Public and separate schools	43,545	47.3%
Band schools	40,508	44.0%
Total	92,108	100.0%

Although the literature highlighted a range of governance approaches to localised control of education systems and some difficulties encountered, it is apparent that the evolutionary development of local control is ongoing. The records available on initial approaches to governance of band-controlled schools seem to fit organisation as metaphorically described by Allaire and Firsirotu (1984) as "little societies, social systems equipped with socialisation processes, social norms and structures and projecting evidence of distinct cultural traits" (p. 194). For example, Cummins (1985) described the development of the first Indian school board at Blue Quills in 1970/71 as a concrete manifestation of the native orientation to education (p. 18). He claimed that the extent of this orientation depended on the degree to which educational aims and objectives reflected cultural priorities within the context. Other examples of community-controlled governance approaches were described by Kipohtakaw Community Education Centre (1987a, 1987b), the N.I.B. (1988b), Richardson and Richardson (1986), Gardner (1986), Grell (1983), and Irwin (1992). A number of writers (Assheton-Smith, 1977; King, 1981; Urion, 1975; and others) drew attention to the administrative role shock encountered by native leaders as Band Councils attempted to develop decision-making processes, manage fundamental change, control resource utilisation, design educational programs, and develop operational structures.

Overall, research endeavour spanning almost two decades has highlighted the fact that experiences at the local community level of assuming control of education systems have not truly reflected the intended focus of the Indian control of Indian education policy (Clintberg, 1987; King, 1981; Kirkness, 1985, 1992; Matthew, 1990; N.I.B., 1988a, 1988b, 1988c; Urion, 1975; & others). For example, it was claimed by Kirkness (1985) that differing interpretations of the Indian control of Indian education policy have created dual perceptions of control, which in turn has enabled Indian people to be involved in but not to control education systems. "The result of this process is that Indians are now operating Department of Indian Affairs programs. This was not the intent of the policy. This approach does not respond to the need for parents to be involved in goal setting" (p. 6). However, Reiter (1990) pointed out that

the essential feature of a band council or a tribal government is its power of local government. The duties of the band council vary with the particular band in question. . . . Like other local authorities, [they] never function with complete autonomy in local affairs. . . . The band council acts as an agent of the Minister and the representative of the band with respect to the administration and delivery of certain federal programs for the benefit of Indians on Indian reserves. (pp. iv-2)

This perspective suggests that the concept of operating as opposed to the concept of controlling education systems at the local level (Kirkness, 1985) is entrenched in legislation. According to Bezeau (1989):

The government is firmly in control of the education of Canadian Indians by virtue of the Constitution Act, 1867, section 91(24), which gives the federal government the right to make laws for Indians. . . . Specific provisions for the education of Indians are contained in the Indian Act, a federal statute. (p. 92)

As summarised by the National Indian Brotherhood (1988b), "The federal government remains firm in its position that it can only delegate authority for First Nations to participate in and administer previously developed federal education programs and cannot allow First Nations to exercise control in any broader sense" (p. 97).

However, delegates to the First Nations School Review challenged the federal



government to "determine the legal framework for the transfer of jurisdiction and management of education to First Nations" (p. 111).

Currently, such legislative action is solicited by many First Nations leaders to enable local community members to exercise control, to have directing power and influence in decision-making processes and to build governance structures in accordance with local cultural priorities. In a similar vein, Armstrong (1987) claimed that native trustees of education have a responsibility to satisfy the requirements of traditional education as a natural process: "The answers for quality education lie outside the parameters of the process of schooling. . . . We need to see the danger of separating the learning of skills from traditional indigenous philosophies" (p. 19). Indian Nations at Risk (1991) concurred with this philosophy:

If Native cultures remain important today, as many Native political and educational leaders believe they do, they must again become a part of the educational process. Tribal groups must develop educational structures built on their cultural priorities and foster continued development and growth. (p. 31).

Further, it was claimed that although delicate balances between community, federal, provincial, and parental responsibilities must be negotiated, the responsibility must rest with parents in local communities. Conversely, in stark contrast to the former claims for unilateral control of education by native people, Power (1989) suggested a path of mutual co-operation:

In an increasingly interdependent world, in order to survive, the indigenous need to cooperate with people of other cultures more technically advanced. Through mutual cooperation it is possible for indigenous people to reach an educational level which will ensure their continued survival. That stage is neither segregation nor assimilation but integration where the indigenous are cultural equals in democratic, multicultural nations moving toward a world-federated, more peaceful international society. (p. 49)

In undertaking this investigation, the researcher assumed that local school board members elected by the respective communities exercise a leadership role in influencing local educational practice which ultimately guides the evolutionary

development of native governance structures. The objective of this study is to tap the understandings and experiences of elected trustees of the priorities and the processes involved in this ongoing quest for the further development of community-controlled education systems.

### **The Context of School Boards**

Although this study focuses on the development of predominantly native school boards, the researcher considered it important to review the literature on the wider organisational context of school boards to provide a base line of knowledge in terms of general governance structures and functions.

In recognition of the uniqueness of individual school-community needs and priorities, educational decision making at the local level is deemed appropriate (Coleman, 1990; DIAND, 1982; N.I.B., 1988). However, Fullan (1982) and Mann (1977) noted that in reality only a small percentage of the general public are actively involved in the educational decision-making process. Butterfield and Pepper (1992) emphasised a distinction between *parental involvement* and *parental support* by defining parental support as encouraging children to value education and to achieve, and parental involvement as including participation in school life in supportive advisory and decision-making roles (p. 47). Further, McLaughlin (1982), Murphy (1983), Nyberg (1977), and Richardson and Richardson (1986) emphasised the importance of parental understanding of role function in the decision-making process in order to influence meaningful educational direction at the community level.

### **Nature of the Organisation**

During the last three decades, a number of investigators (Greene, 1992; Gross, 1958; Institute for Educational Leadership, 1986; Lutz, 1980; Mertz, 1986; Simon, 1986; Zeigler, 1975) have defined differing perspectives on school board direction of

educational governance. According to the Institute for Educational Leadership

(I.E.L.):

School board membership is the highest form of public service. . . . The local school board is the only means through which the community expresses itself in respect to education. Boards are the interpreters and translators of need and demand. They mediate between and among conflicting interests. They sort out contending values, and they initiate and enact policies to govern locally . . . within existing . . . statutory boundaries. (p. 14)

This perspective describes a traditional 'grass-roots' lay-control democracy in which the superintendent as the executive arm follows the instructions of the legislative, which acts in the best interests of constituents (Mann, 1977; Zeigler & Jennings, 1974). According to Coleman (1974), Kogan (1986), and Storey (1989), this form of representative local school board governance is compatible with the idea of participative democracy, in which persons affected by the decisions are given a direct voice in making those decisions. The complexity of this role was described by Coleman:

The trustee has been entrusted with ensuring that the wishes of the community are a part of the complex forces that commonly occur on a wide range of issues in public education. . . . The trustee derives legitimacy not from expertise but from both the institutional machinery of representation and in particular the purposive element of this concept. (p. 53)

Conversely, in an investigative study conducted by the I.E.L. (1986), "board members, educators, and the public said that divisiveness and the problem of building a cohesive board from disparate members, many with single constituencies or issues, are major factors affecting board effectiveness and community perceptions" (p. 10).

Other approaches to school board governance described in the literature (Greene, 1992; Tallerico, 1989; Tucker & Zeigler, 1980) reflect hierarchical and bargaining approaches. The hierarchical, professional model depicts governance as primarily a technical process in which the superintendent is the dominant actor in decision and policy making. "School boards act less as decision-making bodies and

more as communication links between the superintendent and the public" (Tucker & Zeigler, p. 6). In contrast, a political orientation to governance depicts a process of bargaining among the superintendent, board, and community. The objective of this approach is to enable decision-making policy and development which reflect both the recommendations of the superintendent and the preferences of the community. However, in reality, the process is often fragmented by perception-driven, value-based forces which lead to prejudice, conflict, and interest-group coercion. This frequently causes a shift in emphasis towards a bureaucratic-governance orientation in which the effects of personal values, member perceptions, and motivation tend to be minimised.

Tucker and Zeigler (1980) and Lutz (1980; cited in Greene, 1992) conducted a study which explored the distinction between professional boards, which promote educational policy making as primarily a technical, expertise-based process heavily dependent on the recommendations of the superintendent, and political boards, which view the process as one in which the board represents community interests and bargains with the superintendent. Findings of the study indicated that a majority of boards adopt the professional orientation and that both contextual and political variables are related to board governance orientations. Other variables such as demographics and the resources and the priorities of local communities were identified by Storey (1989) as factors which affect governance orientations and board performance. "Election to a board that is charged with local decision-making carries with it the assumption that elected representatives will be highly responsive to local needs, issues and goals" (pp. 4-5).

As indicated by a number of investigators, including the Committee on Tolerance and Understanding (1984), Green (1990), Indian Nations at Risk (1991), Charleston and King (1992), Kipohtakaw Education Centre (1987c), the N.I.B. (1988b), and Irwin (1992), aboriginal leaders seek governance orientations which

promote the involvement of parents in developing systems to eliminate the historic paternal approach to educational governance. It was advocated by Indian Nations at Risk (1991) that "partnerships between schools and native communities and tribes must become one of the highest priorities. Schools must encourage positive political relationships, recognize the value of a people's language and culture, and support broad community participation in schools" (p. 32).

### **Nature of School Board Relationships**

In 1958 Gross highlighted the importance of the study of school board relationships. He asserted that "superintendents and school board members, because they run our schools, are at the heart of any educational problem and its solution" (p. 2). Almost three decades later, Hentges (1985) claimed that "effective public education is dependent, to an important extent, upon a good working relationship . . . a partnership . . . between the school board and its chief executive officer" (p. 3). In school board-superintendent relationships where mutual trust has been established, a democratic governance approach enables flexibility for mediation of levels of control exercised by the lay/legislative branch, the professional/executive arm, and the community influences. The impact of these mechanisms indirectly defines parameters, sets limitations, and constrains the latitudes within which the community, superintendents, and school board members function (Hentges, 1985; Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Pitna & Ogawa, 1981; Tallerico, 1989; Whitehead, 1989). However, this does not necessarily guarantee distinctive role definition.

According to Boyd (1976), "We can never expect that school board-administrative staff relationships will be easily defined or regulated. This is the price of the simultaneous pursuit of democracy and efficiency" (p. 126). A review of the literature variously suggested that the relationship between superintendents and school boards is beleaguered by conflicting cross-currents of pressures inherent in (a) the

ambiguous nature of policy-making and administrative functions in educational governance, and (b) a sustained incongruence between lay control and the power of professional expertise (Andrews, 1970; Boyd, 1976; Greene, 1992; Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Institute for Educational Leadership, 1986; Tucker & Zeigler, 1980).

Greene (1992) noted that, while school boards are elected to be representative bodies, they are often expected to defer to the expertise of the superintendent and choose the 'best' educational policies regardless of community preferences (p. 220). According to Zeigler (1975), "School boards behave like typical schizophrenics. . . . On the one hand, they willingly (indeed eagerly) give power away to the experts. . . . On the other hand, they espouse an ideology of lay control" (p. 8).

Findings in the I.E.L. study of school boards indicated that, in practice, the distinctive functions of board members as policy makers and superintendents as administrators frequently become blurred in the day-to-day priorities of management. "Board members continue to grapple with tensions over necessarily gray areas between a board's policy-making role and the superintendent's administrative responsibilities" (p. 11).

The impact of the incredible diversity and complexity confronting school boards poses a unique challenge to members as they contend with competing issues, competing philosophies, resource problems, litigiousness, and turnover in membership and/or administration. Frequently, board members become discouraged over the ability of the board to get its act together (I.E.L., 1986, p. 18).

Racial and ethnic minority board members often feel the same way but for different reasons. . . . They chafe at bureaucracy, seeing volumes of rules and regulations as road blocks to their own effectiveness as board members as well as inhibitors of quality education for minority students. They often feel strong ties to minority or ethnic constituencies and they believe those loyalties to be very important, more compelling than an abstract concept of ties to the district at large. (p. 18)

### **Board Member Motivation**

Why do people become board members? Although it may be argued that a school board should attract members who are altruistically motivated, the fact is that board members have both self-interested and altruistic motives. Savage (1986) claimed that the reasons suggested by trustees themselves

represent a complete range of rewards that would fill anybody's hierarchy of needs and values. Personal enrichment, fun, prestige, substantive interests, nostalgia, sentiment, friendships and personal associations, opportunities for business, professional and social contacts, desire for change and social involvement, personal aggrandizement, honor, privilege, psychic rewards, visibility and societal recognition, the challenge of governance, and the feeling of accomplishment are all specific factors mentioned to me by board members. (p. 9)

Each of these factors represents a force which conveys a personal expectation of the process which will shape board membership behaviour in the particular setting (Nadler & Lawler, 1977). Although these specific incentives may change with the experience of board membership, board training and learning, and commitment to the institution's mission, individual motives, particularly when driven by self-interest, are powerful forces which affect board development and relationships.

According to Pitman (1972), "the ultimate mission for a board member is to fulfill "his[/her] main responsibility, . . . the effective transmittal of informed public expectation" (p. 9). An expected outcome of this action may include intrinsic rewards of satisfaction and personal growth to the individual trustee and tangible rewards to society. However, this ideology may conflict with personal expectations of what the process involves, board member responsibilities, and differing individual perceptions of the link between actions and outcomes. Subsequently, board member behaviour is often motivated by perceptions of desired outcomes which have positive value for the individual. This creates variability in motivation within board membership, which often leads to misinterpretation of roles and fragmentation of organisational goals. For example, findings in a study conducted by Gross (1974) on why people want to

be board members indicated that the higher the proportion of board members motivated by 'civic duty,' the more likely it is that there will be consensus among them on what their own role and their superintendent's job should be. The higher the proportion of board members motivated to 'represent specific groups' and/or 'to get political experience,' the less consensus board members will have on what their own role and their superintendent's job should be (p. 85).

The motivation of individual board members clearly affects what the board does. The chairman of the board concerned with organisational effectiveness may interpret the motivation of individual board members within the constraints of the working environment and take steps to stimulate motivation in respect to board expectations. However, his/her perceptions of positive outcomes may be incongruent with wider organisational expectations.

### **Board Member Learning and Development**

An increasing number of parents continue to devote their time and energy to serve on local school boards (Wirt & Kirst, 1982). However, election to a school board is often synchronous with little understanding of the role of trusteeship and disparate degrees of board member readiness to undertake influential decision-making responsibilities which determine educational policies and processes. "The board is made up of basically good intentioned people, but they don't have the experience or backgrounds to deal with complex issues" (community leader Indiana, I.E.L., 1986, n.p.). It is generally accepted that special qualifications, preservice training, or on-the-job development are not prerequisites for election to a school board (Tallerico, 1993).

Investigative work conducted through the Institute for Educational Leadership (1986) revealed that (a) some continuing programs of board development *do* exist, but most offer fragmented support; (b) state school board associations are the most active



providers of training and development programs for members; (c) greater attention is given to orientation activities for new board members than to programs which plan for the continuous growth of all members; (d) initiative for developing and conducting orientation programs is the responsibility of professionals at the state and local levels; and (e) board member participation in professional-development activities is voluntary.

The need for school board education and development is recognized generally, but too often it is merely informational and episodic. There is minimal access to or involvement in development skills building. Too little attention is given to development of working relationships among board members and to development of boards as corporate bodies. Boards which recognize the need for board development have retreats and goal setting meetings, evaluate their performance and provide for oversight of the implementation of their policies. (p. 12)

Studies conducted by Kask (1990), Kerrins (1984), Stuckey (1988), and Tallerico (1991b) compared the views of superintendents and school board members in respect to training and development needs of trustees. Kask found that, while superintendents emphasised the need for trustees to learn their role and responsibility, board members contended that knowledge about business functions, current issues, and curriculum were more important factors in their development as trustees. The I.E.L. (1986) contended that although boards are encouraged to produce policy which supports trustee development, few boards adopt this course of action (p. 19).

A study conducted by Tallerico (1991b) highlighted contrasting perspectives provided by trustees and superintendents which reflected "(a) differences in how school board member learning is defined and understood; (b) differences in the perceived centrality of the superintendent in trustees' learning and development; and (c) differences in assumptions about the learners" (p. 96).

In emphasising school board development needs, Tallerico (1991b) advocated interventions which reflect both perspectives of trustees on their own learning and current knowledge about adult professional development, increased awareness

regarding the control of such interventions in respect to emerging policy trends, and the value of modifying existing research practices "to expand current understandings of work worlds and perspectives of these local policy actors" (p. 106).

Cistone (1977) and Kerr (1964) investigated the structure and process of school board member socialisation. They attempted to identify influential agents of socialisation, such as the values and views of administrators and/or the attitudes and knowledge of experienced board members. Cistone concluded that "there is strong evidence that roles, skills, expectations and experiences from the preincumbency period prepare the novice for his new role and ease his transition into it, . . . that when they joined the school board they were already well socialized into the role as a consequence of recruitment, pre-incumbent experiences, and anticipatory socialization" (p. 32).

As documented in a study conducted by Tallerico (1991a), findings reported evidence of board members' introspection, self-education, and critical analysis of their own behaviour and of information and perspectives provided by others. This suggests that board members are, "in general, capable and independent-thinking learners, quite purposefully engaged in multiple processes of self-directed growth and development" (p. 24); "neither passive assimilators of a school board social culture nor powerless novices in the construction of their own learning" (p. 30). A conclusion drawn in this study suggested that, although social and political contexts of work and the effects of external socialisation partly explain on-the-job growth, it is important to explore internally driven factors which influence board member learning and development. "Extended dialogue with trustees remains a largely untapped source of insights" (Tallerico, 1991b, p. 105).

How does this profile of school boards relate to the development of school board trusteeship in predominantly native communities? What does the research tell us about the development of school board trusteeship in a native context?

### **Models of Native School Boards**

The literature reviewed highlighted a number of examples of the development of native school boards. These included an Indian school board at Rough Rock, Arizona, on the Navajo Reservation which incorporated native language and culture into the educational program and precipitated changes in the community's social, economic, and political structures (McCarty, 1989); an Inuit school board that has been in existence for a decade in northern Quebec (Isherwood, Sorensen, & Colbourne, 1986); the development of the first Indian school board at Blue Quills (Cummins, 1985); and the creation of divisional boards of education in the Northwest Territories (Isherwood et al.).

### **Divisional School Boards in the Northwest Territories**

The establishment of divisional boards of education in the Northwest Territories is explored in some detail in this review because of the relative geographical proximity to the focus of this study. The important step taken in recent years by the Northwest Territories Department of Education to put the control of education in the hands of local people through the establishment of divisional boards of education was a fundamental change in governance structure. Although the DIAND (1982) policy had encouraged the decentralisation of decision making to promote native-education priorities, it did not provide for the diverse cultural interests of northern communities. As reported by Isherwood et al. (1986):

With a shift towards more responsible government in the N.W.T. and a determination by the people of the N.W.T. to control the institutions that affect their lives, there has been a renewed emphasis on preserving native culture, language and lifestyle. Present policy ~~reflects~~ the following objectives:

1. To assist . . . Inuit . . . in having access to education programs and services which are responsive to their needs and aspirations, consistent with the concept of . . . Inuit control of Inuit education.

2. To assist and support . . . Inuit . . . in preserving, developing and expressing their cultural identity with emphasis upon their native languages.
3. To assist and support . . . Inuit . . . in developing or in having access to meaningful occupational opportunities consistent with their community and individual needs and aspirations. (p. 9)

These objectives promoted a devolutionary shift of powers and heralded the emergence of new people in the power structure. How did these native people learn their roles as board members, and what were the forces which impacted upon the development of divisional school boards in the Northwest Territories? Isherwood et al. (1986) described the organisation and content of a program of study designed to train Inuit leaders to help them assume command of divisional boards of education. Although the program was organised by personnel in southern Canada who had long experience in school board practice and research, "the objective was not to tell the Inuit how to form and operate a school board, but rather to get them to discuss how they wanted the board to function" (p. 10). The content of the program of study focused on the mechanics of school board operations and encompassed discussions on school board organisation, the role of the board member, the definition of corporate goals, an analysis of policies formulated by northern boards, and observation visits to southern school boards. According to Isherwood et al.:

The content of the program seemed to fulfil the needs of participants. . . . That is, they were able to define . . . the structure of the school board, the allocation of powers between the board and the executive committee, . . . the role of the school board member, the relationship between the school board and the school administration, . . . the goals of the school board, and specific directions for the development of board schools. (p. 14)

However,

It was evident from the beginning of the program that participants had already established normative working arrangements based upon experience. . . . Leaders had emerged from the group, and they provided goal-based and procedural direction to program sessions. (p. 14)

As documented by Isherwood et al. (1986), since the establishment of the first divisional school board in the Baffin Region in 1985, the Northwest Territories

Department of Education is increasingly delegating to native people decision-making responsibilities for school organisation, school finance, and school curriculum.

The story of the development of native divisional boards of education in the Northwest Territories emphasises the facilitation of change through the provision of resources which enabled training programs. Further, the development of divisional boards in the Northwest Territories was clearly a collaborative process which was influenced by the socialisation of prospective board members to the southern school board 'culture.' This emphasises the importance of resourcing and collaboration in the development of native educational trusteeship. However, N.I.B. (1988a, 1988b) identified inadequate resourcing and lack of support as major deterrents to the development of native educational governance.

### Synopsis

The literature reviewed in this chapter exposed a range of perspectives which inform the study undertaken on the development of local school board trusteeship in three predominantly native communities.

Although it may be assumed that traditional native governance forms identified in the literature by Deloria & Lytle (1984), Jules (1988), Malloch (1984), and Manuel and Posluns (1974) may influence the development of native educational governance as suggested by Armstrong (1987), Barman et al. (1987), Coburn (1985), Jules (1988), and Richardson and Richardson (1986), the impact of policy initiatives and legislation during the last two decades encouraged the development of multifaceted approaches to native educational governance structures (Alberta Education, 1987, 1991; Ghitter, 1984; N.I.B., 1988b; Power, 1989).

The assumption of local control of education systems by native communities, as highlighted by the N.I.B. (1988a, 1988b, 1988c), Gardner (1986), Green (1990), and Richardson and Richardson (1986), following the articulation and the implementation

of the policy statement *Indian Control of Indian Education* by DIAND (1982) and the N.I.B. (1972), presented formidable management challenges, as described by Assheton-Smith (1977), King (1981), and Urion (1975). Ongoing negotiations associated with dual perceptions of control and legislation, as reported by Kirkness (1985), Bezeau (1989), and Reiter (1990), enabled native people to be involved in decision-making processes but not in the control of education systems (Clintberg, 1987; Kirkness, 1985; N.I.B., 1988a, 1988b, 1988c).

The literature pertinent to the context of school boards (a) illuminated a range of governance orientations adopted during the last three decades (Greene, 1992; Gross, 1958; Institute for Educational Leadership, 1986; Lutz, 1980; Mertz, 1986; Zeigler, 1975); (b) emphasised the incredible diversity, complexity, and challenges confronting school boards (Boyd, 1976; Hentges, 1985; I.E.L., 1986; Tallerico, 1989); (c) considered board member motivation (Gross, 1974; Pitman, 1972; Savage, 1986); and (d) explored board member learning and development (Cistone, 1977; I.E.L., 1986; Kerr, 1964; Tallerico, 1991; Wirt & Kirst, 1989).

Although the literature highlighted a limited number of examples of native school board development endeavours (Cummins, 1985; Isherwood et al., 1986; McCarty, 1989), there is sufficient research that points to the need for further exploration in this area.

In summary, the literature review exposed a dichotomy of thought in terms of priorities for the development of native educational governance. On one hand, it was asserted that traditional philosophies and cultural boundaries make a difference in framing leadership (Armstrong, 1987; Bolman & Deal, 1992; Indian Nations at Risk, 1992; Sergiovanni, 1992; Starblanket, 1981). This orientation suggests a more segregated approach to native educational governance, the intent advocated in the Indian control of Indian education policy articulation and implementation (DIAND, 1982; Kirkness, 1985; N.I.B., 1972, 1988a, 1988b, 1988c). According to Indian

Nations at Risk, "The Native educational context must be one in which native culture and language and the role and status of tribal societies are paramount" (p. vii).

On the other hand, Power (1989), Ghitter (1984), and Alberta Education (1987, 1991) promoted a multifarious approach to the development of native educational governance based on multicultural understanding and co-operation: "neither segregation nor assimilation but integration where the indigenous are cultural equals in democratic multicultural nations moving toward a world-federated, more peaceful international society" (Power, p. 49).

In view of the trends pertinent to the development of native education highlighted in the literature, the intention in this study to capture the insights of L.S.B.C. members into the development of trusteeship is both appropriate and timely.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

#### **The Naturalistic Research Strategy**

The purpose of this study was to gain insights into the understandings of local school board members about the processes through which local school board trusteeship is developing in three communities in Northland School Division. Specifically, this entailed eliciting individual board member understandings and experiences of (a) the contextual essence of the community, (b) processes aligned to their election to the L.S.B.C. in 1992, (c) local and global forces impacting upon the development of trusteeship, (d) Corporate Board governance functions, and (e) L.S.B.C. organisation and practice. To achieve this aim, it was necessary for the researcher to "get in touch" (Eisner, 1991, p. 11) with the constructed realities of participants and "examine how the world is experienced from the perspectives of those inside the culture" (Dobbert, 1982, p. 31).

Therefore, the study was based on the assumptions of the interpretive paradigm which was characterised by Burrell and Morgan (1979) as seeing "the social world as an emergent social process which is created by the individuals concerned" (p. 28). The interpretive paradigm is informed by a concern to understand the world as it is by uncovering the meanings and multiple realities that people themselves assign to their actions at the level of subjective experience (p. 28). In this study the question of the development of local school board trusteeship was explored from an interpretation of individual participants' perspectives based on how they chose to understand themselves, how they interpreted their experiences, and how they structured the social world in which they live.

A qualitative methodological approach to research which is consistent with the interpretive paradigm and "allows the researcher to get close to the data, thereby developing the analytical, conceptual, and categorical components of explanation from



the data itself" (Owens, 1982, p. 6), was adopted to achieve the purpose of the study. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982), qualitative research is an "umbrella term" (p. 2) used to describe research strategies which share the following characteristics:

- Qualitative research focuses on the natural setting as a direct source of data, and the researcher is the key instrument.
- Qualitative research is descriptive.
- Qualitative researchers are concerned with process rather than simply outcomes.
- Qualitative researchers tend to analyze data inductively.
- "Meaning" is an essential concern to the qualitative approach.

(pp. 27-30)

Although Bogdan and Biklen suggested that naturalistic inquiry is another name for qualitative research (p. 3), Owens phrased a distinction between *naturalistic*, which alludes to *ways* in which one may seek to examine reality, and *qualitative*, which alludes to the *nature of the understanding* that is sought. This clarification by Owens conceptualises naturalistic inquiry as appropriate methodology for conducting qualitative research.

Qualitative inquiry seeks to understand human behavior and human experience from the actor's own frame of reference, not from the frame of reference of the investigator. Thus naturalistic inquiry seeks to illuminate social realities, human perceptions, and organizational realities untainted by the intrusion of formal measurement procedures . . . or preconceived notions of the investigator. The qualitative nature of the resulting description enables the investigator to see the 'real' world *as those under study see it*. (Owens, p. 7)

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined five established principles of the naturalistic inquiry model:

- Realities are multiple, constructed, and holistic.
- Knower and known are interactive, inseparable.

- Only time- and context-bound working hypotheses (idiographic statements) are possible.
- All entities are in a state of mutual, simultaneous shaping so that it is impossible to distinguish causes from effects.
- Inquiry is value bound. (p. 37)

In further explaining this research methodology, Owens (1982) used the term *naturalistic* to describe one view of the nature of reality in which the real world 'out there' is a dynamic system of interrelated and interactive parts which must be examined in the context of the whole. The reality of the world is viewed from a phenomenological perspective (p. 6). In seeking to "understand the realities of human organizations and the behavior of people in them, the naturalistic view would hold that those organizations must be examined in all the rich confusion of their daily existence" (p. 6).

Using these insights, the proposed field-focused naturalistic-inquiry approach was guided by a case-study methodology.

Merriam (1988) recommended the selection of a research design in accordance with how the problem is shaped, the questions it raises, and the type of outcomes desired (p. 6). Specifically, it was claimed by Yin (1984; cited in Merriam) that questions concerned with 'what' and 'how many' are best addressed by a quantitative experimental approach, while qualitative case-study designs more appropriately address questions of 'how' and 'why.' Further, he argued that case-study design is particularly suited to situations where the researcher has little control and "where it is impossible to separate the phenomena's variables from their context" (p. 25).

According to Patton (1990), a case study may involve a program, an organisation, or a community in which one aim is to capture individual differences or unique variations between programs, people, or settings (p. 54). The objective of this

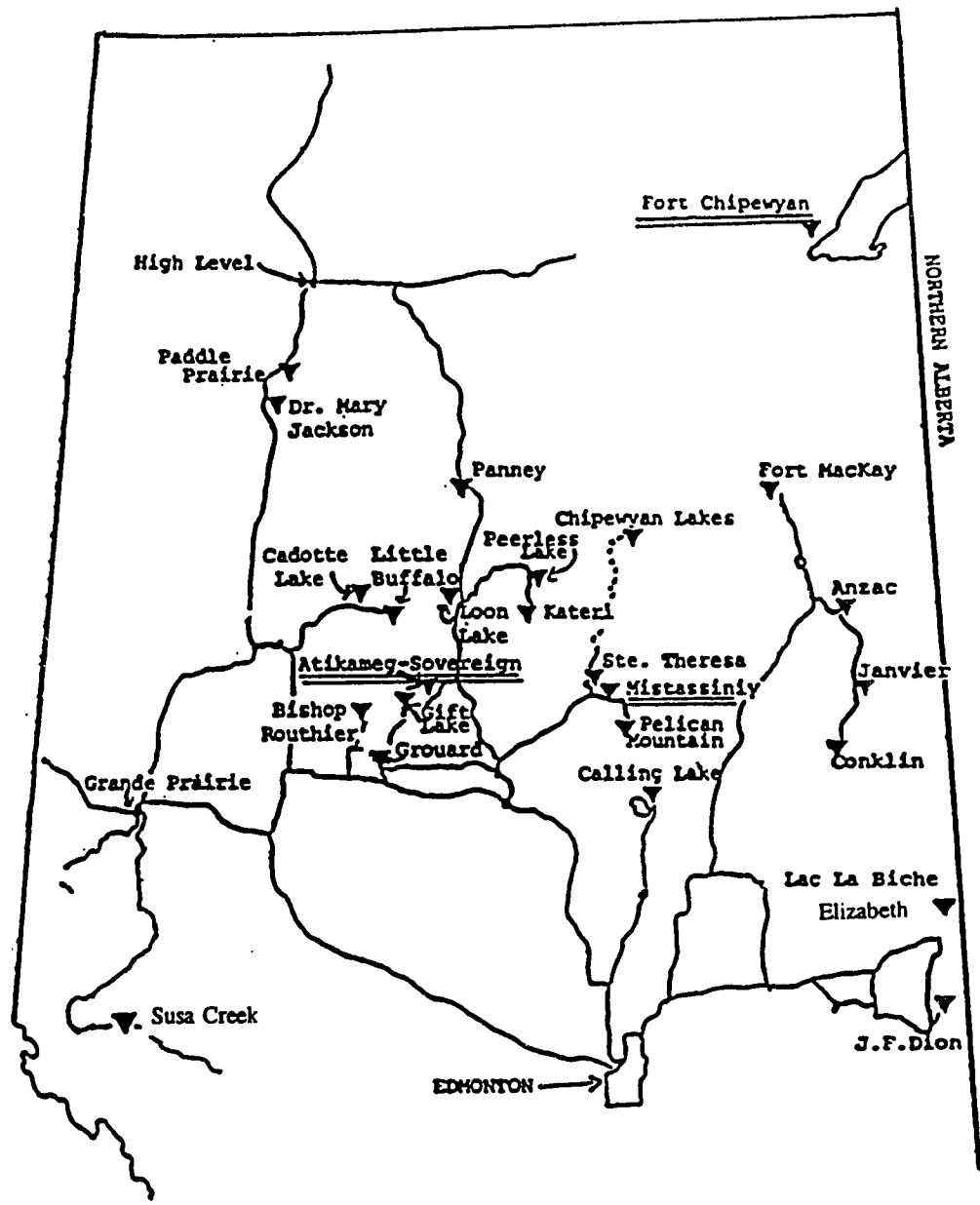
study was to capture the individual understandings and experiences of local school board members in three unique school communities.

The case-study designs described by Yin (1984) offer four variations: single cases with a single unit of analysis, single case studies with multiple units of analysis, multiple case studies with a single unit of analysis, and multiple case studies with multiple units of analysis. Given the individual realities of each of the participants in their respective unique organisational contexts, the school jurisdiction was conceptualised as the single case and the participants in each of the school/communities as three distinct units of analysis. It was assumed that each participant's understanding and experience was unique to the specific context and therefore was not generalisable to the whole case, that is, to the wider school jurisdiction.

The case-study methodology was selected as the overall design of this study for two reasons: first, because the exploration of the study focused on the questions of 'how' and 'why' individual participants in communities in this school division understand and experience trusteeship in the way they do. The researcher sought to discover and interpret individualised participant perspectives while absorbing situational and interactional forces which create unique realities, and to describe that unit of analysis "in depth and detail, in context and holistically" (Patton, 1990, p. 54). Second, the elements of the proposed study were consistent with the four 'special' features defined for case studies by Merriam (1988): (a) The study was *particularistic* in that it focused on the real-life understandings, feelings, and realities of individual participants in unique school-community situations; (b) it was *descriptive* because the end product of the study was multiple units of analysis which describe multiple realities in understandings and experiences of the development of local board trusteeship within the context of the case, a predominantly native school jurisdiction; (c) it was *heuristic* because the case study illuminated the reader's understanding of how and why local school board trusteeship was developed in these communities; and

(d) it was *inductive* because concepts and understandings emerged through an examination of the data which was grounded in a specific context (pp. 11-13).

**Site identification and access.** During a four-month period in 1992 the researcher was involved in consultative work in Northland School Division. This was a unique opportunity to gain contextual understanding and to meet key personnel informally. In September 1992 the researcher met with the division's Political Action Committee to enlist support for the conduct of a study in the division. An audience with the Education Standing Committee of the Corporate Board followed. At the November 1992 meeting of the Corporate Board, the recommendation submitted by the Education Committee for the writer to conduct a study in the division was approved by the Corporate Board of Trustees (Board Motion 17881/92) (Appendix 4). Subsequently, a senior officer of Northland School Division assisted the researcher to liaise with authorities in local school communities and to negotiate access to specific communities for the purpose of conducting the study. Initially, the researcher visited eight school communities to meet personnel, to attend those L.S.B.C. meetings held according to schedules, and to explain the purpose of the study. This assisted the process of selecting three school communities as the study sample. Selection of the three sites was guided by community-member response to the researcher's explanation of the purpose of the study, individual member and committee interest in participating in the study, and the potential assessed by the researcher for collection of data from multiple sources. Each of the sites selected—Fort Chipewyan, Wabasca-Desmarais, and Atikameg-Sovereign (see Figure 2)—presented elements of contextual uniqueness during the researcher's initial visit to the community; each L.S.B.C. indicated an interest in participating in the study; and more than 50% of the board members on the L.S.B.C. emerged as prospective interviewees with stories to tell.



- ▼ Schools in 1993
- = Study sites selected

Figure 2. Map of Northland School Division.

**Data collection.** In accordance with the naturalistic research design, multiple data sources and methods of collection were planned from within the natural settings of the study.

Data were collected during the period of February 7 to June 30, 1993. During that time multiple visits to each of the three communities were made for extended periods of time. Visits were programmed in consultation with regional and local education authorities; and, wherever possible, visits were scheduled to coincide with dates of local board meetings. At the last count, a distance in excess of 9,000 kilometres were travelled by road and air.

According to Patton (1990), a combination of observations, interviewing, and document analysis enables the researcher to use different data sources to validate and cross-check findings. "Using a combination of data types increases validity as the strengths of one approach can compensate for the weaknesses of another approach" (p. 244).

In contrast to quantitative data, which may seek to measure in numerical form the extent to which the development of local school board trusteeship is occurring, qualitative data collected for this study, in keeping with Patton's (1980, p. 22) recommendation, included *detailed descriptions* of specific communities; the people, interactions, and observed behaviours between trustees and school community/wider divisional personnel; *direct quotations* from the participants about their experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and thoughts related to their understandings of the development of local school board trusteeship; and *excerpts or entire passages* from school-community and division documents and records. The aim was to find out what was important to participants about the development of school trusteeship and to represent their realities in their own terms. As suggested by Patton, this required being in or around an ongoing social setting and 'getting close' physically and psychologically to real-life situations as interpreted by participants (p. 43). Therefore, it was important

to spend time in communities engaged in productive loitering routines, getting acquainted with the school community, observing and noting interactions, talking to people, explaining the presence of the researcher, and generally absorbing "the way things are done around here."

Initially, it appeared to be important to clarify the purpose of the presence of the researcher; in two school communities some board members asked if the researcher was from "central office," checking to see if they had read their policy manual and school trusteeship brochures (apparently a requirement for all newly elected board members). As time went by it became apparent to the researcher during visits to these communities that the nature of her professional relationship with the Northland School Division administration was important to prospective participants. For this reason the investigator adopted and maintained as much as was practicable a stance apart from the administration, except for priorities such as the observation of protocol. In adopting and communicating this position of impartiality in relation to prospective participants in the study, the researcher endeavoured to establish and maintain a rapport with board members which would encourage them to share their experiences and understandings of the development of local school board trusteeship without contrived bias. As suggested by Owens (1982), it is important to understand the multiple realities of participants uncluttered by the imposition of governance parameters and expectations. "One cannot understand human behavior without understanding the framework within which the individuals under study interpret their environment, and . . . this, in turn, can best be understood through understanding their thoughts, feelings, values, perceptions, and their actions" (p. 5).

The prolonged presence of the researcher in each of the three school communities initially assisted the study to evolve on the basis of an emergent plan (Owens, 1982). Participants in the study were not identified prior to accessing each community because the arrangements with school-community authorities encouraged

those board members who wished to share their perceptions with the researcher to volunteer to do so.

**Observation.** A number of writers (Berg, 1989; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Merriam, 1988; Patton, 1980, 1990) have emphasised the value of observing, listening, and reflecting as a means of uncovering the meanings of participant actions and values and the nature of the context in which they work. "The observer/observed is an interdependent relationship in which the researcher too may be changed as a result of the interaction. Indeed, it is this interdependence that gives naturalistic inquiry its perspective" (Patton, 1980, p. 192).

In situations where motives, attitudes, beliefs, and values direct much, if not most of the human activity, the most sophisticated instrumentation we possess is still the careful observer—the human being who can watch, see, listen, . . . question, probe, and finally analyze and organize his direct experience. (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 213)

It was suggested by Merriam (1988) that observation is a research tool when it (a) serves a formulated research purpose, (b) is planned deliberately, (c) is recorded systematically, and (d) is subjected to checks and controls on validity and reliability (p. 88).

In emphasising the importance of observation in qualitative research, Patton (1990) noted the following advantages: (a) the observer gains a better understanding of the context, which is essential to a holistic perspective; (b) first-hand experience as an observer enables a researcher to be open, discovery oriented, and inductive in approach; (c) the researcher may observe things that routinely escape the conscious awareness of participants; (d) direct observation may enable a researcher to absorb feelings, events, impressions that participants may not want to discuss in an interview; (e) observations permit the researcher to move beyond the selective perceptions of participants and the understandings presented during interviews; (f) the impressions and feelings of the observer become part of the data to be accessed in understanding and interpreting the unique social phenomena being studied (pp. 203-205). Data were



collected through ongoing observation for the duration of the study through informal and formal encounters with trustees. This included interviews with individual board members, meetings with L.S.B.C. groups, meetings with school and wider community personnel, and observation of community routines.

In accordance with Patton's (1990) suggestion, the researcher maintained a journal and logged detailed notes which described the physical attributes of the settings; observed activities, interactions, and behaviours; subtle factors such as symbolic and connotative meanings of words; and nonverbal communications such as dress, 'hunches,' and what one suspects, sees, or interprets does and does not happen. Further, it was important for the researcher to reflect upon and record the nature and the intensity of her own feelings at the time that they were experienced (of frustration, impatience with the loitering activities from time to time, the struggle to understand the information overload, and simply coping with the role change to that of researcher). Yin (1989) described field notes as the fundamental data base of case studies and qualitative research.

**Interviews.** The purpose of interviewing, according to Patton (1980), is "to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective" (p. 196). It is essential to ask participants about those things we cannot directly observe, such as their feelings, thoughts, and intentions; historical perspectives; ways in which they have organised the world; and the meanings they attach to the world and their experiences in it (p. 196).

Time was dedicated to meeting informally with prospective interviewees to explain the general purpose of the study and to establish a relationship of mutual trust, respect, and co-operation. The *reciprocity* model presented by Jorgensen (1989) assumes that some reason can be found for prospective participants to co-operate in the study and that some kind of mutual exchange can occur (p. 71). Gay (1987) claimed that "by establishing rapport and a trust relationship, the interviewer can

often obtain data that subjects would not give on a questionnaire" (p. 203). In the very first meeting with prospective participants, the investigator stressed that all conversations would be confidential and that the identity of participants would remain confidential.

Merriam: "I advocated a combination of interviewing approaches "so that some standard information is obtained, some of the same open-ended questions are asked of all participants, and some time is spent in an unstructured mode so that fresh insights and new information can emerge" (p. 74). To encourage each participant to tell his or her story from a personal perspective of trusteeship, two basic approaches to qualitative interviewing recommended by Patton (1990) were adopted. First, the *informal conversational interview*, which relies on a spontaneous generation of questions in a relationship of trust, formed part of an ongoing interview process. This encouraged the respondents to present those understandings, experiences, events, and situations deemed relevant without the interruption of a question/issues guideline. Second, a *general interview guide* approach was used. This consisted of a list of questions or issues to be explored, but neither the exact wording nor the order of questions was determined ahead of time. An interview schedule (Appendix 10) was used as a guide only, because the researcher preferred to encourage interviewees to tell their stories spontaneously from a personal-priorities perspective. Not all the questions were asked of all interviewees, and some questions were reframed by the researcher to fit a particular perspective. The use of this approach encouraged the respondent to construct his/her realities in unique ways without question/interviewer-imposed bias. Further, it enabled the researcher to build a conversation and to word open-ended questions spontaneously within particular topic areas (pp. 280-283) as the respondent's story evolved.

During the five-month period of fieldwork a total of 19 local school board members were interviewed. In addition, informal chats were documented with many

other school-community personnel, including band councillors, social workers, nurses, counsellors, teachers, and principals. It was deemed that this mix of informants represented respective school-community populations and was consistent with Berg's (1989) notion of purposive sampling (p. 110). Consistent with a traditional native approach to learning and teaching, participants were encouraged to tell their stories from a 'lived-experience' perspective. The venues for the interview sessions were nominated by interviewees and included Band Council offices, homes, schools, and a restaurant.

With the permission of individual participants, each interview was audiotaped. This enabled the researcher to note "gestures, language, and the behavioral patterns of the interviewees as significant descriptive data" (Owens, 1982, p. 7). In some cases multiple interviews provided an opportunity for participants to clarify and/or verify information conveyed during the previous interview and to address emergent data. According to Guba and Lincoln (1981), "the interview provides for continuous assessment and evaluation of information by the inquirer, allowing him to re-direct, probe, and summarize" (p. 187).

**Document sources.** Data collected through observation, field notes, and interview recording were supplemented by a review and analysis of documents, including school division policy manuals, records of local board and corporate board meetings, memoranda, and school-community newsletters. This provided a basic source of information about the school/school division/community decisions and background which may have influenced the development of trusteeship, alerted the researcher to important questions for pursuit through direct observation or interviewing, and served to increase data validity.

Documentary data, according to Merriam (1988), are particularly good for qualitative case studies because they "can ground an investigation in the context of the problem being investigated" (p. 109). Analysis of these data, from the perspective of

Guba and Lincoln (1981), "lends contextual richness and helps to ground an inquiry in the milieu of the writer. This grounding in real-world issues and day-to-day concerns is ultimately what the naturalistic inquiry is working toward" (p. 234).

### **Data Analysis**

The process of data analysis required the researcher to make sense of data collected, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns, and construct a framework for communicating the essence of what the data revealed (Patton, 1990). During an early stage of data gathering, the researcher made the decision to handle the data collection and analysis in three separate stages—one 'stage' for each community. Therefore, each of the six steps of data analysis described in the following section of this report guided the data-analysis process for each of the three school communities in which data were collected.

**Simultaneous data collection and analysis.** The development of the study was shaped by an emergent process of simultaneous data collection and analysis. This enabled the researcher to direct the data phase of the study productively and to develop a data base that was relevant and manageable. According to Owens (1982):

An important element in the design of naturalistic research is starting with questions of broad scope and proceeding through a conceptual funnel—working with data all the while, ever trying to more fully understand what the data mean—making decisions as to how to check and how to verify as the investigation unfolds. It is important . . . that the investigator be fully prepared to look for unanticipated perceptions arising from the data as . . . she gets closer and closer to the data over time.  
(p. 11)

**Transcription.** The first step in this simultaneous process was to transcribe the recorded interviews into print form. This was done as soon as was humanly possible after each interview. Some of the interviewees edited the transcription, but this involved mainly sentence-construction corrections and/or additional information. The substantive content was not altered.

**Scanning and noting.** As part of an ongoing process, audiotapes of interviews were played many times; and field notes, transcripts, and documents were read through several times. Comments, observations, and queries were noted in margins. This process of conversing with the data, constantly isolating patterns, and listing ideas was an important exercise, albeit at times a confusing one. However, Merriam (1988) claimed that "notes taken while scanning constitute the beginning stages of organizing, abstracting, integrating, and synthesizing, which ultimately permit investigators to tell others what they have seen" (p. 131). The significance of much of the data was not always recognised at the time of collection, but in many instances it was realised during the rereading of field notes and transcripts and as the events during the study unfolded.

**Unitising.** The next step was to identify units of information that would serve as the basis for defining categories. Lincoln and Guba (1985) claimed that a unit must be heuristic in that it should provide information that is relevant to the study and stimulate the reader to think beyond the information provided. Second, the unit must be interpretable within an understanding of the context of the study, without additional information (p. 345).

**Developing categories.** This involved coding the units through an identification of recurring regularities in the data and the development of conceptual categories or typologies that interpret the data. Merriam (1988) claimed that this is largely an intuitive process which is systematic and is informed by the study's purpose, the investigator's orientation and knowledge, and "the constructs made explicit by the participants of the study" (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p. 191). In executing this task the researcher adhered to the four guidelines for developing comprehensive and illuminating categories suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1981): (a) the number of people who mention something or the frequency with which something arises in the data, (b) the categories determined by the audience to be important, (c) categories

which stand out because of their uniqueness, and (d) categories which highlight areas of inquiry not otherwise recognised (p. 95). To determine whether or not a set of categories was complete, the researcher utilised the following checklist: a minimum number of unassignable data items, relative freedom from ambiguity of classification, and category plausibility relative to the data (p. 96).

Consistent with the criteria developed by Merriam (1988), all categories constructed were congruent with research goals and questions, all relevant items were capable of categorisation, and each unit was assigned to one category (p. 136).

At this point in time data collected from observation, interview, and document analysis for each community were independently and roughly assorted into broad thematic classification which addressed the research questions.

**Organisation of data.** The data were organised by adopting the index-card strategy proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1981). This involved coding each unit of information according to basic identifying factors on index cards, sorting the cards into files by comparison of the information on one card with the information on the next card, labelling the cards, and coding the cards within that pile accordingly. The topics were cross referenced to ensure easy access and management.

In reflecting on this stage of the process, the researcher identified with Patton's (1990) feelings about the analysis of qualitative data being "a painstaking process, . . . going over notes, looking for patterns, checking emergent patterns against the data, cross validating data sources and findings, and making linkages among the various parts of the data and the emergent dimensions of the analysis" (p. 379). This was indeed the process experienced as the researcher managed the data collected from each school community in separate sequence.

### **Trustworthiness**

According to Guba and Lincoln (1981), it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure the trustworthiness of inquiry guided by the naturalistic methodological perspective. It is incumbent upon the researcher to persuade the audience that the findings of the inquiry are believable and worth paying attention to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290).

A number of techniques were used during the study to ensure trustworthiness so that the reader could believe what he/she was reading. The four criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1981) for establishing trustworthiness—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—and applied in this study will now be discussed, with examples of strategies employed to ensure compliance.

**Credibility.** Credibility of the research was established by the extent to which the interpretations and the findings of the study were deemed to be credible by the participants who were sources of the data. According to Guba and Lincoln (1981), the study is credible if the multiple sets of constructed realities provided by participants can be identified by participants within the themes identified and constructed by the researcher. To ensure that credibility of the research was established, the researcher adopted the following strategies: The researcher spent considerable time 'on site' in prolonged engagement and persistent observation to establish a climate of trust and provide ample opportunity for participants to assess the truth of the researcher's credibility, intentions, and purpose. The loosely structured interviews were conducted in a relaxed setting and were unrestricted and unhurried. The researcher frequently paraphrased comments and sought clarification of comments where necessary. When the data were analysed and categorised, a random selection of participants was invited to check the credibility of the categories. Further, the researcher adopted the technique of triangulation to establish credibility by verifying information collected from different sources, including interviews, document analysis,

observation, and field notes. According to Denzin (1970), "The rationale for this strategy is that the flaws of one method are often the strengths of another and by combining methods, observers can achieve the best of each while overcoming their unique deficiencies" (p. 308). Much of the information acquired through observation and interview was verified through document analysis and informal conversation.

**Dependability.** Although a demonstration of credibility is sufficient to establish dependability in practice, it is important to determine dependability in principle (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). This involves scrutiny of the process and the product of the inquiry by an independent researcher who can on the basis of his/her findings attest to the dependability of the inquiry. Therefore, the researcher sought the assistance of a colleague to check independently the credibility of the findings in relation to the data-process collection and analysis. Further, the original data of the study have been kept in permanent record form, including the original audiotapes, the computer-disk files, and the printed transcripts. Field notes in various forms, which also constituted evidence for the study basis, have been retained. Verbatim participant quotations documented in Chapters, 5, 6, and 7 of the report are clearly identified on the original transcripts. Collectively, this evidence base provides confirmability and dependability in the study as well as accessibility to data for further analysis if required.

**Confirmability.** The criterion for establishing confirmability is the extent to which the characteristics of the data in the study are confirmable with other sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 300). In this study the researcher adopted the techniques suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1981); namely, (a) a confirmability audit, in which a colleague independently examined the product—data findings and interpretations—and attested that it is supported by data and is internally coherent; (b) triangulation, involving the use of various sources of data to enable the researcher to acquire information aligned to the research questions from several different sources



systematically; (c) member checks, which involved providing a random selection of participants with the researcher's interpretations of their constructed realities to determine the extent to which those interpretations are confirmed by the participants. Further, the assistance of a local school board member who was not associated with the school communities under study was solicited to determine if she could recognise and confirm the interpretations of the participants' understandings and experiences of the development of local school board trusteeship in the findings presented.

**Transferability.** Transferability was described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as the "fittingness, the degree of congruence between sending and receiving contexts" (p. 124). It is incumbent upon the researcher to provide a data base of what is often called 'thick description' in such a way that personnel reading the outcomes of the study can use the participants' understandings of the development of school trusteeship to make a judgement about whether transfer to other settings can be contemplated as a possibility.

According to Owens (1982):

Thick description is more than mere information or descriptive data: it conveys a literal description that figuratively transports the readers into a situation with a sense of insight, understanding, and illumination not only of the facts of the events in the case, but also of the texture, the quality, and the power of the context *as the participants in the situation experienced it*. . . . It takes the reader there. (p. 8)

Further, to comply with the criterion of transferability, and consistent with the elements of naturalistic inquiry, the report is written in ordinary language; it is plausible and carefully documented, provides corroboration from multiple sources, is rich with thick description that "takes the reader there," and is fair and ethical in that it safeguards the rights of respondents (Owens, 1982, pp. 16-17).

One final and broad-ranging technique applicable in establishing trustworthiness was adopted in this study. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal, described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as "a kind of diary in which the investigator, on a daily

basis, or as needed, records a variety of information about self (hence the term 'reflexive') and method" (p. 327). This technique is considered useful in assisting the auditor, where applicable, to make judgements on the extent to which the inquirer's biases influenced the outcomes of the study.

The inquiry was enriched by the researcher's access to multiple sources of data and the reciprocal high level of trust and co-operation established and maintained between the researcher and the participants in the study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher was conversant with the University of Alberta Research Ethics Review Policies and Procedures of the Department of Educational Administration and understood that ethical arrangements made to protect participants involved in the study must comply with the specified guidelines. The following procedures were adopted:

1. Organisational endorsement
  - i. The purpose and the nature of the study were fully explained to members of the Corporate Board of the school division. Written approval to conduct the study was obtained (Appendix 4).
  - ii. Local board approval to visit communities and talk to board members was fully negotiated and obtained from each L.S.B.C.
2. Obtaining informed consent of participants
  - i. The purpose and the nature of the research was clearly explained to prospective participants in the communities.
  - ii. An opportunity was provided for prospective participants to raise questions of clarification regarding obligations and responsibilities associated with involvement in the study.
  - iii. Participation in the study was voluntary and was indicated on a basis of informed consent.

### 3. Rights of participants

Participants were advised that

- i. they had the right and would be given the opportunity to withdraw at any point during the study;
- ii. they had the right to refuse involvement after giving informed consent;
- iii. they had the right to refuse to be tape recorded; and
- iv. they had the right and would be given the opportunity to read, amend, delete, or confirm their responses when transcribed interview data were returned to them.

### 4. Anonymity and confidentiality issues

- i. The names of the participants were not revealed in any part of the study.
- ii. Participants were referred to as respondents, interviewees, or participants in the report.
- iii. The researcher exercised discretion in withholding information or references which might have disclosed the identity of the respondents.

### 5. Protecting participants from harm

- i. The participants were assured of the exploratory rather than judgemental nature of the study.
- ii. All information collected during the research through observation or interview was treated as confidential.
- iii. Permission of participants was sought to use specific quotations.
- iv. Data in the form of audiotaped interviews, field notes, transcripts, or documents are kept in a secure place accessible only by the researcher.
- v. The identity of the participants remained confidential.

### 6. Ethics Committee approval to conduct the study was obtained.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Context: Northland School Division**

#### **Introduction**

Northland School Division has been characterised as a native jurisdiction (Chalmers, 1985; MacNeil, Johnson, & Norberg, 1981; Swift, Carney, & Ewasiuk, 1975). Currently, the division is responsible to the Minister of Education for the delivery of educational services to 25 geographically isolated school communities which collectively represent highly complex populations of native ancestry; that is, residents in isolated school communities who are identified by themselves, by their families, by their community, and/or by government agencies to be status/treaty Indians, nonstatus Indians, or Metis. In 1981 MacNeil et al. wrote:

Although there are no recent accurate statistics, it is estimated that between 96 and 98 percent of the students enrolled in Northland Schools are Treaty Indians or Metis. In the 1980-81 school year, 44 percent of the students in Northland Schools were registered Treaty Indians. (p. 9)

The division was designed to serve the native population who lived in little clusters on small streams or big rivers or lakefronts in sparsely populated communities throughout the northern half of Alberta (Chalmers, 1985). It was claimed by Fisher (1981) that the boundaries of the jurisdiction were established in accordance with the demarcation of the territory within Alberta specified in Treaty 8. As recorded by MacNeil et al.:

The municipal or organization status of the communities in which the Division operates schools falls into several categories.

. . . Schools operated under an agreement with the Federal Indian and Northern Affairs Department are located on Indian Treaty Reserve Land.

. . . A number of settlements are on tracts of land established under the Metis Betterment Act. Each is administered by a Metis Settlement Association under the guidance of the Department of Municipal Affairs.

. . . The majority of the communities are located on land in Improvement Districts. Some are situated on Crown leases, while others have deeded land. . . .

. . . A number of communities are classified by the Department of Municipal Affairs as hamlets, an unincorporated townsite or community plan with a specific boundary, or any area so designated by the Minister.

. . . Both the hamlets and settlements have an informal local government

organized in the form of a Community Association. The various Improvement Districts have been divided into electoral districts for the purpose of electing representatives to Advisory Committees to assist the Municipal Affairs Department in providing municipal service to the area. (pp. 9-10)

The history of the development of this frontier school system is characterised by change processes during three decades of governance which have necessitated individual and organisational adaptation and learning within unique community structures. The extent of cultural diversity across communities was described by MacNeil et al. (1981):

There are wide variations among the communities in regard to the extent to which the traditions, language and culture have been retained. The degree to which a community is isolated is an important factor in this regard. Some of the more isolated communities are quite traditional and the working language in the community is Cree or Chipewyan. Certain communities which have easy access to large towns tend to lose their culture more quickly and the language has become English. The majority of native people in the area speak and understand Cree. In one or two communities Chipewyan is spoken. (p. 9)

Amidst changing administrative processes, changing environmental and social factors, and the changing composition of schools in the division, significant events pertinent to the development of this school jurisdiction included legislation and its respective outcomes (1965, 1968, 1976, 1983), relocation of the Divisional Office from Edmonton to Peace River (1971), and regionalisation of the delivery of educational services through the establishment of four area offices (1988).

The many governance changes and challenges of Northland School Division are well documented in studies commissioned by the government and conducted by Swift et al. (1975), McKinnon (cited in Wall, 1987), MacNeil et al. (1981), and Ingram and McIntosh (1980, 1981, 1983a, 1983b). The outcomes of such study reports had a significant impact on the development of Northland School Division in terms of policy initiatives which influenced the evolution of the political and educational infrastructures now in place.

### **History of Development**

The evolutionary development of Northland School Division may be traced across a time period in excess of three decades. For the purpose of clarity in presentation, the stages of development which emanated largely from legislation, outcomes of investigative studies, and subsequent structural changes are loosely grouped into eight time phases.

#### **Pre-1961: An Accountability Dilemma**

During the years 1958-1960 attention was attracted to the educational need of Metis and other children living in the forested region of northern Alberta, particularly in the areas between the Peace and Athabasca Rivers and north of Lac La Biche. Minimal education services had been provided by a number of agencies, including federally controlled Indian schools, Protestant and Roman Catholic mission schools, Metis Colony schools, and isolated independent public and separate school districts. A number of factors, including rapidly growing Indian and Metis school enrolment, rising costs of education which the agencies could not afford, and the subsequent establishment of eight public school districts at the request of Church authorities, collectively precipitated a crisis (Northland School Division, n.d., pp. 1-2 of 8).

Chalmers (1977) recalled the dilemma confronting authorities at this time:

Thus by the end of 1960, the Department of Education found itself responsible for several hundred Metis children who heretofore had attended Indian, mission, and Metis colony schools, as well as a few isolated public schools. There was also an undetermined number, as there had been for a hundred years, in tiny settlements where no educational services whatever were available. Because of the illiteracy of their parents, they could not even use the services of the provincial Correspondence School Branch. As already mentioned, school districts traditionally had been established and educational services were provided only on local initiative and where there were tax resources to support a school. But in 1960 the Minister of Education . . . and the government were persuaded to adopt a new policy: that every child for whom the

province was responsible—in other words, non-Indians—had a right to an education as good as that available to rural children who lived in the settled and developed parts of the province. (pp. 101-102)

In order to implement this policy, structural organisation was deemed necessary. The best model seemed to be that adopted by Saskatchewan for its northern area; there the Department of Education had established its Northern Schools Branch with its own professional and support staff. Its domain consisted of the native schools under provincial jurisdiction in the province's boreal forest. Its control was vested in a committee consisting of senior officers of the department (Chalmers, 1985, pp. 5, 37).

Although the Saskatchewan model offered potential for adoption as an organisational structure for northern Alberta, as a branch of the government the system was subject to uninformed political pressure. Further, the slow process of change inherent in the operation was perceived as a disadvantageous factor in the context of a rapidly changing northern Alberta environment.

### **1961-1965: Establishment of the Division**

On December 30, 1960, the Minister of Education established the Northland School Division, comprising over 30 school districts and some 20 schools (Chalmers, 1985, p. 5). At this time, it was envisaged that the school division organisational structure developed for Alberta's 'northern-wilderness schools' would embody the advantages of the Saskatchewan model and at the same time avoid the disadvantages identified. The establishment of Northland School Division brought into one organisation a number of schools from different sources; namely:

1. Federally operated Indian Schools which accepted Metis and other children as a courtesy;
2. Metis colony schools formerly operated by the Department of Public Welfare;
3. Certain public and separate schools catering to local residents which, by reason of isolation or of ethnic or economic factors, were not conveniently administered by other school divisions;

4. Certain public and separate schools, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, which in general found difficulty in providing sufficient funds to operate adequately.

The following school districts were those initially incorporated into Northland

School Division:

- Acomb S.D. No. 4525
- Fort Fitzgerald S.D. No. 4561
- Conklin S.D. No. 4835
- Kikino S.D. No. 4866
- Elizabeth S.D. No. 4886
- Chipewyan S.D. No. 4924
- Anzac S.D. No. 4979
- Janvier S.D. No. 5114
- Pelican Mountain S.D. No. 5088
- Elk S.D. No. 5130
- Sweet Grass S.D. No. 5110
- Trout Lake S.D. No. 5111
- Desmarais S.D. No. 5112
- Wabasca S.D. No. 5113
- Chipewyan Lakes S.D. No. 5128
- Grouard S.D. No. 3722
- East Prairie S.D. No. 4916
- Lubicon S.D. No. 5094
- Loon Lake S.D. No. 5099
- Atikameg S.D. No. 5115

(Northland School Division, n.d., pp. 1-2 of 8)

At this time,

with some notable exceptions, the schools were structurally sub-standard and overcrowded; pupil attendance was frequently perfunctory; achievement was below any realistic expectation; many teachers lacked minimal Alberta qualifications; books, equipment, and supplies were inadequate; and the curriculum offered was in many ways unsatisfactory.

Pupil achievement was affected, additionally to some of the factors noted above, by the economic instability of the parents, by the migratory nature of their employment, by poor medical and dental care, by ignorance of English, by hostility to schools, and by standards and values held by parents and pupils which were and are at some variance with those commonly accepted in white communities and by many teachers.

(Northland School Division, n.d., p. 1 of 8)

The challenge confronting this newly established predominantly native school jurisdiction was graphically described by Allison (1983):

The logistic problems of supplying and supervising thirty or so schools dispersed over more than 400,000 square kilometres would be daunting under the best of conditions, but in Northland they are exacerbated by difficult terrain and poorly developed communication systems. . . . Some schools can only be reached by bush plane or other expensive or seasonal modes of transportation such as barge or winter road. (p. 30)

However, within two years the "Moose" Division—so called because it was big, awkward, and "went like hell" (Chalmers, 1977, p. 103)—had gained the reputation of being a school system in which native children were regarded as first-class, not



second-class, citizens (Chalmers, 1985, p. 7). This attracted applications from a number of school districts for transfer to Northland.

From 1961 until 1965 the division operated under the aegis of the School Act. Although this entitled the division to the same rights as any other school jurisdiction in Alberta, the Minister appointed an official trustee to administer services instead of an elected board of governors. The official trustee was assisted by a superintendent appointed by the provincial government. Although the school division was administered by employees of the Department of Education at this time, the office of the division was established outside the premises of the Department of Education (MacNeil et al., 1981; Chalmers, 1985).

At that time it was perceived that this newly established organisational structure was eminently more suitable than the Saskatchewan model because the Saskatchewan Northern Area was an integral part of the Department of Education. Northland had a separate legal existence. It was—and is—in effect a corporation with its own entity. Specifically, the following advantages of the new administrative structure were identified:

1. While no creation of the Crown is ever wholly impervious to political control, the new school division was at least somewhat freer from such influence than if it had been a part of a government department.
2. With its simple administrative structure, decisions could be made and implemented far faster than would have been the case had Northland been controlled by the complex and cumbersome governmental bureaucracy. This fact was of particular importance in emergencies—and emergencies are endemic in northern education.
3. Funds once granted to Northland could not be recalled and reallocated to some other educational activity.
4. Similarly, funds unexpended at the end of a fiscal year were not returnable to the public treasurer, with the necessity for reappropriation, always dubious, for the next fiscal year. (Chalmers, 1977, p. 102)

However, the fact that legal responsibility for governance of the division was not entrusted to an elected board of trustees at that time did not go unnoticed. Swift et al. (1975) speculated on the following reasons for the appointment of an official

trustee: (a) the unreadiness and/or inexperience of native people to elect representatives and/or to serve as governors, (b) perceived problems with the logistics of the electoral process in diversified and isolated communities, and (c) an apparent concern by administrators about the potential fiscal ability of prospective elected trustees (p. 19).

Nonetheless, the newly created Northland School Division began to establish a clear identity.

Many were the methods by which Northland endeavored to build morale among its people. Its coat of arms, cast in aluminum, adorned the entrance to its office and was placed on each of the new schools. The dominant figure on the field is Moose. On each side stands a human figure, one a fur trader, the other Indian. A scroll identifies the arms as those of Northland School Division Number 61, and at the top there is an open book.

Moose is ubiquitous in the Division. His portrait appears on all stationery and other printed material. (Chalmers, 1985, p. 32)

By 1962 Northland was operating 25 schools with an enrolment of about 1,400 children, most of whom were Metis (Chalmers, 1972, p. 243).

One of the most important early achievements of the Moose Division was to integrate the education of Indian and other pupils over most of the area which Northland served. This was accomplished in two ways. The first was a negotiation with Indian Affairs of a master agreement covering the tuition to be charged for Indian children attending Northland schools. Previously, many agreements had been reached across Canada, each covering a single school, each based on the cost of operating that school, to which Indian Affairs contributed in proportion to the number of its children in attendance. Northland proposed a single agreement to cover all schools in its domain at an average rate based on the total cost of operation of the whole system. At first, Indian Affairs was somewhat reluctant, but eventually agreed. Thus, for the first time in the history of Canadian Native education, a global contract was achieved covering all schools in a large rural system. (Chalmers, 1985, p. 9)

A particularly notable and innovative aspect of this agreement was that Metis and other nonstatus children were to be given full access to these schools, thus avoiding many of the complications arising from the restrictive administrative definition of *Indian* perpetuated by the Indian Act (Allison, 1983, p. 28). The

acquisition of the reserve schools resulted in the division's enrolment increase to 2,149 in 1963 (Chalmers, 1972, p. 243).

A number of jurisdictional changes occurred in the 1960s precipitated by factors such as the occasional requirement for the division to provide education to nonnative children in small, isolated areas; the removal of several reserve schools from the division, to be placed under the control of band authorities; and the addition of some native communities located outside the division's boundaries. As documented by Chalmers (1977):

Some districts were transferred from other systems to Northland and vice versa. Some new districts were created and new schools built. In other cases schools were closed because of population shifts or centralization of services. To effect the latter, a whole fleet of buses was acquired. Staff was upgraded. Literally dozens of teacherages were built; a few were purchased. (p. 103)

However, the significant overall result of these changes, according to MacNeil et al. (1981), was the fact that "some 98 percent of Northland's current enrolment of two and a half thousand pupils are children of the First Peoples" (p. 9). Nonetheless, by 1965 it became evident that Northland School Division required legislation in addition to that contained in the provincial School Act if it was to effectively meet unique educational needs of communities in northern Alberta.

#### **1965-1968: Northland School Division Act**

In 1965 the Northland School Division Act was passed by the legislature of the province, and "there was a school division *pas comme les autres*. No longer was it defined in terms of its component school districts" (Chalmers, 1977, p. 103).

Northland was to operate under the regular legislation applicable to all school jurisdictions in the province, plus the special provisions contained in the new act. Two of the provisions in the new act changed the manner of governing the division.

1. The mandate of the division was changed.

Under the new legislation, Northland consisted of all areas not included in other systems or in Indian reserves north of Township 55. Thus its southern boundary stretches clear across the province 330 miles north of the Forty-Ninth Parallel *coinciding* very approximately with the North Saskatchewan River. Its northern limit is that of the province itself. (p. 40)

The division was required under this mandate to provide education for all the residents in this large geographical area. The vastness of the region was described by Swift et al. (1975):

A tremendous area is encompassed, although at any particular time the division is only seriously involved where there are communities to be served. There is always a prospect of a new community forming. Two new schools were put into operation in September 1974, involving much administrative effort and expense to provide staff and physical plant. (p. 9).

2. The new act stipulated a board of five trustees appointed the Lieutenant Governor-in-Council. The official trustee was required to relinquish his power and authority to the board. It was hoped that this board

would provide co-ordination between the various departments of the Government which were involved in providing services to people of the North. The appointments included a professor at the University of Alberta as Chairman, three representatives from the Government—one from each of the Departments of Education, Municipal Affairs and Public Welfare—plus one trustee who lived in the Northland area. As provided in the new act, all were appointed for a three-year term. During this period of time the Division continued to operate out of Edmonton with a provincially appointed Superintendent of Schools. (MacNeil et al., 1981, p. 8)

### **1968-1976: Legislation and Study Group**

An amendment to the act in 1968 increased the board membership to seven trustees, one of whom was to be appointed as chairman.

When this change was implemented, the government appointed two members to the board who were not resident in the Division: a full-time chairman and an employee of the Department of Education. The remaining five trustees were natives who resided in the Division. (p. 9)

With the appointment of native trustees to the Northland School Division Board, it appeared that significant progress was being made. However, Chalmers (1972) predicted a ongoing challenge which continues to penetrate governance responsibilities:

Solutions to Native education problems are immensely difficult, and will be achieved only by slow, patient, tedious effort over many years; furthermore, . . . educational progress is probably intimately tied to social, economic and cultural development. In short, for hard problems there are no quick and easy solutions. (p. 225)

During the 1970s parents were beginning to complain about the services that Northland School Division was providing. In particular, they were concerned

that they had no piece of the action in the Division decision-making process. . . . [although] there was a board which included Metis and Indian members appointed by the Minister of Education, . . . they represented him, not the parents or residents of the Division. (Chalmers, 1985, p. 41)

Strong reaction to the reality of the claim that Northland was "in essence a ward of the provincial government" became evident (Swift et al., 1975, p. 6). In response, Northland attempted to establish advisory committees in some schools. However, these committees had no real power and soon became obsolete. At this time it appeared that local communities were totally dependent on external agencies to provide appropriate education for their children without representation from the people themselves. On the other hand, the task of democratically electing a board of trustees when (a) the system's school districts were scattered across the northern two thirds of Alberta, (b) residents of one community had little contact with those of other communities, and (c) native leaders lacked the education and experience to fill the role of school trustee, presented formidable challenges.

In 1974 the government appointed a study group to enquire about Northland's affairs and to listen to complaints about its operations (Swift et al., 1975).

Conclusions and recommendations of the report submitted by the study group emphasised societal and environmental disadvantages:

Northland School Division cannot be regarded as being a school division similar to school divisions and counties elsewhere in Alberta.

The pupils in the schools, in large measure, enter and proceed through school beset by a number of handicaps not to be found generally . . . in relation to the school program. . . . These may include coming to school speaking only a language other than English, an absence of school-reinforcing activities and materials in the home, low attendance levels, various defects arising from low economic status, constriction of general knowledge of the sort useful to the school curriculum, and sometimes the social structure and nature of the community (p. 143).

The thrust of some 100 recommendations documented in the study-group report encompassed school division objectives, governance priorities, educational programs and resources, recruitment of and conditions for teachers, school facilities, and teacherages and are summarised in the following excerpts from the document:

Conceding that there are inherent geographical and logistics problems that cannot be wafted away, conceding that there are human and social conditions and circumstances that make teaching and learning difficult, conceding that an infusion of money cannot possibly cure or counteract all the ills of the schools, conceding that there have been instances of seeming over-expenditure to accomplish certain ends, especially in relation to buildings and maintenance, and that some economies can surely be achieved by better planning, supervision and control, nevertheless the Study Group concludes that a decision in terms of financial support of the division is one that has to be faced. (p. 144)

This report attracted considerable public interest and a degree of challenge described by Persson (1975):

Not surprising, in view of some of the limitations of the report . . . such as the utilization of a cultural deficit model and the perceived isolation of the school from the local community, the report suggests that education cannot come from community sources, such as Elders. This position leads one to question one of the recommendations (9.4) in the area of teaching staff, "that the romance of the North and the possibility of altruistic service be capitalized upon." Given the historical considerations of education in native communities and the colonial situation of a school division with no tax base, such as Northland, it is policies such as these that perpetuate a structure that is considered undesirable by both education administrators and the community. . . . In discussing the purpose of education in Northland, the study group states "the essential point is that fundamental . . . education is what appeared to be favored. The people's views in this regard must be respected. (p. 15)

Given the nature of this report, it is questionable whether the people's views were correctly ascertained, let alone respected. (n.p.)

However, in a significant development in the history of Northland, the primary recommendations of the report highlighted the recognition of the need for involvement of local school communities in governance responsibilities:

- 5.1 That the board of trustees consist of nine members, all appointed by the Minister of Education, comprising
  - (a) an appointed chairman;
  - (b) an officer of the Department of Education;
  - (c) seven residents of the division, each representing a subdivision;
- 5.2 That Treaty Indians resident in communities served by Northland be eligible for appointment; i.e., be deemed to be residents of the division; . . .
- 5.5 That the formation of local school communities be diligently pursued, and to that end there be appointed an organizer or an adviser to local committees;
- 5.6
  - (a) That each local school committee appoint a school representative,
  - (b) That the school representatives assemble in subdivisional or regional meetings for discussion and information about divisional affairs;
  - (c) That once a year there be a division-wide meeting of school representatives;
  - (d) That at appropriate meetings, b or c, recommendations be made to the Minister of persons to fill impending vacancies on the board; . . .
  - (f) That local school committees be assigned, or permitted, significant functions and that they have budgets under their jurisdictions;
- 5.7 That minutes of divisional board meetings be made available to local committees and to schools;
- 5.8 That an annual report be required from the divisional board and that it be available to interested persons. (Swift et al., 1975, pp. 144-145)

### **1976-1983: Legislation and Investigation**

In 1976 a further amendment to the Northland School Division Act permitted the appointment of a board consisting of from three to nine trustees and allowed the Lieutenant Governor-in-Council to establish subdivisions within the school division. This latter amendment was not implemented. MacNeil et al. (1981) reported:

When the present revised School Act was passed in 1970, Northland School Division, along with all school jurisdictions in the province, was required to hire its own superintendent. Thus, in 1970, the Superintendent of Schools was appointed by the board and became an employee of the Northland School Division. (p. 9).

However, it was noted by MacNeil et al. that the provisions of the Northland School Division Act differed in three major respects from those pertaining to trustees in other school jurisdictions:

- (1) Northland's trustees are appointed by the Government while in the rest of the province they are elected.
- (2) The chairman is appointed by the Government, whereas in other parts of the province, the elected trustees select their own chairman.
- (3) The trustees are not required to be resident in NSD, a specific requirement in order to be eligible for membership on other boards. (p. 16)

In recognition of these facts, a decision was made in accordance with the specifications of the legislation that the board should consist of seven trustees, to be appointed for a three-year term and to be deemed eligible for reappointment. Subsequently, the board was composed of two nonresident members and five native members (MacNeil et al., pp. 9-16). The appointment process was described accordingly:

—To obtain names for consideration by the Government, nominations are requested from within the Division. The Lieutenant Governor-in-Council makes the final selection and appointment. There are no specific subdivisions as are found in other school divisions in the province. The Board has, however, divided the operating schools into five regions and a native trustee is selected from each region. (p. 16)

During this phase of governance in 1977, after 15 years' experience with native education, Northland's first official trustee shared his perspective on the situation in the division:

There are many reasons for the disappointments arising from limited success in Metis education across the Prairie Provinces. One is probably the gradual replacement of enthusiastic and idealistic educators who established these wilderness systems, their roles being taken over by faceless governmental bureaucrats interested more in economical administration than in educational progress. A second reason was that governments, appalled at the unexpected and enormous expense of operating schools in isolated northern settlements, tried to hold the line on



costs. A third was the apparent impossibility of building up a stable teaching staff adequately prepared professionally for the exotic situations prevailing in wilderness schools. A fourth was that the curricula designed for urban middle-class anglophone white children had little relevance to rural lower-class Natives who spoke Cree or Ojibway (Saulteaux) or Chipewyan as their mother tongue. (Chalmers, 1977, p. 108)

Among the many necessary resources and services supplied to Northland School Division by government departments and agencies, Education North, a human-resource development process, was launched in August 1978 as a provincial interdepartmental program jointly funded by the provincial government through Alberta Education and the federal government. According to the *First Annual Evaluation Report* of the Education North Evaluation Project prepared by Ingram and McIntosh in October, 1980:

The overall objective of the Education North project is to effect an improvement of the educational service in Northern communities through increased participation of the local community and its residents in various processes of education delivery. (p. 28)

Within this framework and the provisions of the School Act, the Education North Evaluation Project aimed to achieve five specific goals:

1. The development of increased parental support and community commitment to schooling by direct, active involvement in the local school's operations.
2. The redesigning of aspects of curricula content if required, subject to prior approval by Alberta Education.
3. The identification, collection, development, production, and dissemination of localized educational materials.
4. The development of an improved program of orientation of teachers to northern people with the view to improving teacher retention, community relations, skills, and classroom performance.
5. The implementation of a program to encourage long-term participation by adults in community education activities. (p. 28)

Notwithstanding the level of resources such as Education North dedicated to meet the well-identified needs of the division at this time, problems persisted. Urion (1980) contended:

It is an impossible division to administer well. It is an incredibly difficult division in which to "teach." Good intentions in the division are awash in a sea of structural constraints and in the communications problems

inherent in long supply lines to far-flung locations. There is, of course, no provision in law for parental or community responsibility in the school in any measure enjoyed in most of the rest of Alberta. (p. 3)

He continued and predicted changes:

And change will come because there are enough people, both native and non native, who know that we in fact can not exist as two communities, that change is part of Indian tradition; that the first order of change . . . in the heart and in the mind—has begun. (p. 9)

In 1980 an investigation team commissioned by the government examined the entire operation of the school division. According to the *Report of the Northland School Division Investigation Committee* (MacNeil et al., 1981), particular areas of emphasis included, in part:

- A) the effectiveness of the present method of governance and administration in the School Division and its effect on instruction;
  - B) the public attitude towards education and towards the Schools in the Division, and towards the Division itself;
  - C) changes that would enhance the instruction of pupils and the educational services to the people in Northland School Division.
- (p. 3)

The findings and conclusions of the investigation team indicated that the division was not satisfactorily meeting the needs of the majority of students enrolled in the schools or the expectations of parents and residents. The following excerpts from the MacNeil et al. (1981) Report stated:

The Northland School Division Board of Trustees is a corporate body established by the Legislature of the province to provide for the educational needs of the young people who reside within the boundaries of the Division. The duties and responsibilities, together with the necessary powers to carry out these, are set out in legislation such as the N.S.D. Act and the School Act, and in the Regulations and Orders issued pursuant to these acts. Within these limits the Board must set objectives for Northland School Division and decide to what extent and by what means they are to be achieved. . . .

The question of the governance of education in Northland School Division was an issue of great concern, frequently raised in private discussions, public meetings, and in briefs to the Committee. The concerns tend to fall into two groups: (1) the establishment and membership of the Board; (2) Board operations. (p. 17)

The Board had failed to communicate what it was doing and was generally inflexible to outside suggestions. It is generally perceived that the Board does not consider itself as responsible to the public it serves. (p. 14)

Many residents have become alienated or indifferent towards the educational system. . . . They perceive education in the schools to bear no relationship to the needs of their children. (p. 13)

The Board does not appear to encourage actively good school-community relations. While there is a policy that supports the establishment of local committees, the Board does not actively solicit their creation. (p. 32)

In forecasting the need for significant changes, the investigation committee concluded:

[We] believe that the present system of governance is not able to implement the changes visualized in this report. Therefore an alternate provision must be made for the governance of the Division. . . . An elected Board of Trustees should be installed, pursuant to the guidelines proposed in the recommendations, no later than October 1983, which would be consistent with School Board elections throughout the Province. (p. 64)

Further, it was considered that the appointment of an official trustee in the interim period was appropriate as

the most visible and effective response to the demands for change and to provide for implementation of the recommendations. . . . This change would provide the time to conclude the necessary negotiations with Indian Bands, possible changes in legislation, and the establishment of local committees. (p. 65)

In releasing the report of the Northland School Division Investigation Committee in Peace River in 1981, the Education Minister stated:

We owe it to the people of Northland to re-organize the structure. . . . A greater degree of self-government is needed. The challenge is to discover whether a structure identical to those in the rest of the province will work or whether we need a unique form of self-government for the north. . . . The appointment rather than the election of trustees is considered to be a denial of a democratic right that exists in other areas of the province. (News release, pp. 19-21)

Subsequently, the Minister of Education, Mr. King, dissolved the board and named Mr. Fred J. Dumont, the official trustee, for an interim period of two years to guide the implementation of the proposed organisational structural changes.

**1983: Present Legislation - Elected Governance**

The authority for the institution of this significant recommended change which brought about a restructuring of the division is embodied in the specifications of the revised Northland School Division Act: Chapter N-10, 1 (1983), herewith quoted in part:

- 10 (1) The board of trustees of the Division is continued as a corporation under the name of The Board of the Northland School Division No. 61.
- (2) The members of the board are those persons elected as chairmen of local school board committees under section 5(2). . . .
- 11 (1) Subject to this act, the board has all the powers and duties of a board of trustees under the School Act.
- (2) The board may
  - (a) delegate any of its powers to a local school board committee, and determine and pay the fees and expenses of local school board committee members for attendance at meetings. . . .
- 12 (1) The board shall prepare annually a report of board affairs and provide its report prior to March 31 of each year to each local school board committee.
- (2) The local school board shall make the report available to any elector who requests a copy.

The legislature now provided for an elected Northland School Division board, first established in 1983, with one member from each school community. The 27 chairmen became the elected board of one of Alberta's most complex school systems; its size (in terms of pupil population) is appropriate in consideration of the fact that, in geographical area, Northland is by far the largest school system in the province (Chalmers, 1985, p. 42). The accession to power of the first elected board of trustees marked a new beginning for Northland School Division. The legislation was extremely significant in that it (a) provided a governance structure which brought together diverse groups of predominantly native people in one corporate board, (b) for the first time offered potential for input to decision-making processes at the community level, and (c) articulated a mandate for a community-elected L.S.B.C. Subsequently, the board initiated the formation of the L.S.B.C.s (Board Motion

13836/86). The terms of reference (cited in Northland School Division, n.d., pp. 1-8) are herewith quoted in part:

1. **Formation of Local School Board Committees**
  - 1.1 In accordance with the Northland School Division Act, Chapter N-10-1, Local School Board Committees are formed following an election in each community within Northland School Division. . . .
    - 1.1.1 The number of members to be elected to each local school board shall be determined
      - 1.1.1.1 by the Minister for the first election, and
      - 1.1.1.2 by the board in subsequent elections. . . .
    - 1.1.4 Local School Board Committee members hold office for three years and remain in office until the organizational meeting of the committee following the next ensuing election of the committee.
    - 1.1.5 The Local School Board Committee shall elect a Chairperson and Secretary at the organizational meeting, to hold office during the pleasure of the committee. . . .
    - 1.1.8 The Principal shall sit with the local School Board Committee as an educational advisor . . . (Feb. 11, 1990, Board Motion 16163/90). . . .
2. **Remuneration**
  - 2.1 Each elected member will receive an honorarium of \$700.00 per year, the Chairperson will receive \$750.00 per year, and the Secretary \$750.00 per year.
3. It is the intention of the Corporate Board that Local School Board Committees act in essentially the same way and using the same meeting procedures as would a duly elected Corporate Board with the limitation that all Local School Board Committee decisions are in the form of recommendation or motion, to be considered by the Corporate Board. The Corporate Board shall give consideration to all recommendations presented by the Local School Board Committee.
 

<b>Motion</b>	Local School Board Committees may pass a motion within their area of authority and may act upon that motion immediately.
<b>Recommendation</b>	Local School Board Committees may make a motion of recommendation outside their area of authority to the Corporate Board and cannot act upon those motions until such time as they have been ratified by the Corporate Board.

The scope of authority pertinent to both recommendations and motions is clearly defined in Section 3. L.S.B.C.s may make recommendations and/or motions in the following areas: school policies, procedures, programs, and activities; local school

board budget; school staff-pupil transportation; school and community orientation; school facilities; and record-keeping procedures.

Significantly, the 1983 legislation authorised the same powers to the Northland Corporate Board as those applicable to provincial boards under the School Act. A notable exception was that the Corporate Board had authority to exercise wide delegation powers to a L.S.B.C. (Section 11, Northland School Division Act, Ch. N-10.1, 1983). In addition, the act gave the L.S.B.C. the following specific powers which are unique to school jurisdictions in the province (Section 9):

1. to request the board to institute instruction in a language other than English in accordance with the School Act;
2. to nominate a teacher;
3. to recommend to the board
  - a. the school opening date;
  - b. the number of days and the dates of school operation;
  - c. the length of the school day and the number of minutes of school operation;
  - and
  - d. the number of minutes of classroom instruction and the number and length of recesses;
4. to recommend to the board that Farmers' Day or Treaty Day, or both, be declared to be a holiday;
5. to recommend to the board a policy providing for the use of schools and school buildings other than during the day;
6. to recommend to the board a program providing for orientation of school staff to the division;
7. to advise and assist the board in the selection of a principal, paraprofessional employees, caretakers, bus drivers, and other support staff for a school within the subdivision for which the local school board was elected; and

8. to advise the board and carry out any functions delegated to it by the board.

In accordance with the act, each chairperson of a L.S.B.C. will be a member of the Corporate Board of Trustees, the Minister is responsible for the appointment of the superintendent of schools, and the superintendent is the C.E.O. (Section 10).

Further, the Auditor General of the province is the appointed auditor for the division, a provision unique in the province (Section 13).

Finally, Section 15 of the act indicates that the Minister may exempt the division from any or all of the provisions and regulations of the Alberta School Act or the Local Authorities Election Act.

In order to expedite the conduct of the board, and pursuant to Section 72(5) of the School Act, four standing committees were established per Board Motion 14631/87 to manage (a) finance, (b) personnel, (c) education, and (d) maintenance/transportation. "Each committee shall be comprised of one representative from each of the four Areas and an alternate from that Area" (Northland School Division, n.d., p. 1).

The subsequent restructuring of Northland School Division provided a framework to respond to needs and submissions for involvement long expressed by local school communities, to common priorities identified and documented in sequential investigative study reports, and to significant media attention and coverage. Overall, the primary challenge for the division, according to Allison (1983), was to gain the respect and support of the people it served:

The aspirations of Canada's aboriginal peoples required the diligent pursuit of three fundamental goals: the positive reinforcement and development of each child's Native identity, the provision of educational opportunities that could ensure levels of student achievement comparable with overall provincial standards; and community participation in the operation and the administration and governance of each school. (p. 29)

Significantly, legislated authority for governance of the division invested in a Corporate Board in 1983 offered elected board members a unique opportunity to be

partners in the pursuit of the fundamental goals identified by Allison. It also offered a potential for elected local school board members to become involved intimately in decision-making processes as leaders of educational direction at the school-community level. In essence, this fundamental change of roles and goals categorised elected local board members as an integral part of organisational learning and development in a potentially powerful leadership role of linchpin at local community and wider divisional levels. Further, it challenged elected local board members to break out of traditional ways of thinking and to create new leadership realities by adaptation to change in a learning organisation. In the words of Senge (1990):

At the heart of a learning organization is a shift of mind—from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems caused by someone or something ‘out there’ to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience. A learning organization is where people are continually discovering how they create their own reality. And how they can change it. (pp. 12-13)

### **1986-Present: Direction Setting**

In commenting on the proposed restructuring of Northland School Division initiated by the report of the investigation committee, Allison (1983) claimed: "Nevertheless, the MacNeil recommendations are but a partial blueprint for some of the necessary changes. They need to be translated into sound policy and sensible practice which must, in turn, be pursued with vigour" (p. 34).

In 1986 the Corporate Board of Trustees articulated a broad policy statement. This is documented in the *Education Policies Manual* (Northland School Division, n.d.):

Northland School Division is committed to provide the best possible education opportunities for all students. In recognizing that the schools exist as an integral part of the community and cannot be separated from it, NSD believes that the success of the school program will depend largely upon the effectiveness of parents, students and staff working towards common goals.

The Local School Board Committee represents a community to ensure community involvement and to facilitate communication between the



community and the school on school matters, to the school's administrator and staff and Corporate Board, and from the Corporate Board back to the administrator, school staff and community.

To develop and assist in achieving these common goals, Local School Board Committees exist in Northland School Division in the firm belief that through community involvement the education of children, parental attitudes towards school, and pupil achievement can be enhanced. (p. 1)

This broad policy statement translates the intent of the Northland School Division Act and specifies strategies for implementation. There are other responsibilities in the act which each L.S.B.C. may pursue independently at the local community level. The transfer of governance accountability to a predominantly native elected Corporate Board of Trustees in Northland School Division reflected a number of factors consistent with local and global trends; namely, policy and practice in a number of countries which have supported the concept of localised management of education systems by indigenous peoples (Christie, 1986; N.I.B., 1988a, 1988b, 1988c; Power, 1989); implementation of the Indian control of Indian education policy which encourages local control of Indian education (DIAND, 1982); and a recognition of the value of quality education as defined by local groups such as governing school boards (Brown, 1992).

As documented in Board Motion 14433/87, the Northland School Division Corporate Board of Trustees "considers its major function to be the development of policies consistent with its stated philosophy and goals of education" (p. 1). Further, the board believed that the policy-making process may be described as a six-phase cycle which encourages participation of interested groups at various stages, considers implementation an integral part of the process, and makes provision for monitoring through continuous evaluation and revision procedures (p. 1).

In the 1986-87 school year Northland School Division entered a new era. "The Corporate Board of Trustees hired [selected] its first Superintendent and participated in all aspects of the hiring process for the first time in its history" (Duke, 1992). A report presented to the Corporate Board by the superintendent defined governance

priorities: "While the main aim . . . is to provide improved service to our schools, in order to do so in a clear and coherent fashion, our actions must be guided by policy" (*Superintendent's Report to Corporate Board*, 1988, p. 4). The initiation of new policy was precipitated by a shared and compelling need to improve the quality of education across the division. This prompted the identification of a number of issues which suggested the need for organisational change. Specifically, (a) it had long been felt that too many of the daily operations and decisions of the division took place at the head office; (b) extreme geographic isolation of community schools increasingly challenged existing communications networks; response time to community-expressed needs was a concern; (c) an emergent desire for increased local autonomy at the administrative and elected levels challenged the retention of the centralised administrative pyramid; and (d) there was a recognised need for a regionally based resource team to assist community-based initiatives in defining education direction with respect to unique community needs. The recognition of multifaceted issues confronting Northland School Division at this time is an example of Hogwood and Gunn's (1984) claim that "often what is defined as a problem is really a combination of problems and that various strands need to be separated and identified" (p. 8).

### **1988-1993: Regionalisation of Delivery of Educational Services**

In prioritising the issues and identifying constraints, the Corporate Board of Trustees confirmed direction by approving a reorganisation plan for the operations of the division (Board Motion 1566/89). Within the broad terms of the objective to provide better service to schools, the board approved the regionalisation of the delivery of educational services. As of January 1988 the *Education Policies Manual* (Northland School Division, n.d.) identified four regional service zones. They were:

*Region 1*

- . Panney Camp (Pine Ridge)
- . Loon Lake (Clarence Jaycox)
- . Keg River (Dr. Mary Jackson)
- . Paddle Prairie
- . Cadotte Lake
- . Little Buffalo
- . Nose Creek

*Region 2*

- . Peerless Lake
- . Trout Lake (Kateri)
- . Gift Lake
- . Atikameg-Sovereign
- . Grouard
- . Peavine (Bishop Routhier)

*Region 3*

- . Desmarais (Mistassiniy)
- . Sandy Lake (Pelican Mountain)
- . Wabasca (St. Theresa)
- . Chipewyan Lake
- . Calling Lake

*Region 4*

- . Conklin
- . Fort MacKay
- . Janvier (Father R. Perin)
- . Anzac
- . Fort Chipewyan (Athabasca Delta)
- . J. F. Dion

**The establishment of Area Offices.** Area Offices established to support the four regional service zones are geographically located in Peace River (Area 1), High Prairie (Area 2), Athabasca (Area 3), and Fort McMurray (Area 4). It is noteworthy that none of the chosen town centres have an operating Northland school located there.

As part of the reorganisation plan, Area Office structures, including staff roles and functions of an area superintendent, a pedagogical supervisor, a maintenance supervisor, and a secretary, were designed to provide maximum support to students, parents, board members, staff, and principals in school communities. It was envisaged that this regionally based resource team would be increasingly knowledgeable about local issues and provide appropriate support to (a) improve the quality of education, and (b) assist to develop informed leadership at the local elected and administrative levels of operation. "The fundamental position taken at the beginning of the deliberations was to reduce the number of senior management positions and shift this manpower to direct field orientation, thus in effect flattening the administrative pyramid" (Duke, 1992, p. 3).

Although the implementation of the reorganisation plan was intended to reduce reporting lines, facilitate clearer and quicker communication responses, and develop

reciprocal collegial relationships at the regional level, it was recognised that fragmentation of divisional unity and control might develop. Specifically, a possible lack of authority at the regional level to address local school community initiatives and the precipitation of the evolution of dual layers of bureaucracy were considered. Further, the plan to regionalise the delivery of educational services forecast significant changes in existing roles and functions of staff and represented a fundamental change for all stakeholders, students, parents, teachers, paraprofessional staff, local board members, principals, incumbent central office staff, and prospective Area Office staff.

According to the *Superintendent's Report to the Corporate Board* (1988), the principles of a consultative process were addressed by the Corporate Board in seeking the verbal and written input of stakeholders across the various organisational levels of the school jurisdiction. "Back in communities, Local School Board Committees and staff have been discussing the reorganization and have made specific recommendations for modifications" (p. 11).

Given the sweeping changes underpinning the policy actions implicitly or explicitly experienced by the key actors in this process of change, it was extremely important to the Corporate Board to monitor the implementation of the policy and take appropriate problem-coping and -solving action where deemed necessary. The adoption of this strategy involved those people in Northland School Division affected by the proposed change in a consultative process similar to what Dunn (1981) described as an approach which "explicitly monitors relations among inputs, processes, outputs and impacts in an effort to trace policy inputs from the point at which they are disbursed to the point at which they are experienced by the ultimate intended recipient of those resources" (p. 294). In this way the key actors were able "to begin to create the roles and structures that support and encourage the educational practices that [they] want" (Elmore, 1982, p. 5).

**Review of the Area Office concept.** In 1992 a review by external consultants of the Area Offices concept was instigated as per the intent of policy documented in Corporate Board Motion 15665/89. Subsequently, questionnaires to local board members, parents, teachers, paraprofessional staff, and principals solicited input on (a) original intentions and perceptions of participants regarding the establishment of Area Offices, (b) the effectiveness of regional service delivery, and (c) perceived cost effectiveness. Corporate Board members and Central and Area Office-based staff addressed the same priorities through participation in interviews.

According to Duke and Associates (1992):

There was wide and comprehensive participation in this review. It is noteworthy that the regions established in 1988, now called areas, have changed very little in schools which are located in them. When this review began there were 26 schools, two more than in 1988. The additional schools were Susa Creek in Area 1 and Elizabeth School in Area 4. (pp. 5-6)

General findings of the review indicated that the concept of Area Offices had strong stakeholder support and that the objectives of the reorganisation of the delivery of education services of (a) better communication, (b) cost effectiveness, and (c) improved educational and administrative services had been achieved (p. 25).

Consistent with its broad statement of philosophy, the approach adopted in developing and implementing regionalisation policy initiated by the Corporate Board is an approach which is intrinsically linked to a process of consultation, collaboration, and searching and learning across organisational levels to create methodology which integrates agreed goals. According to Benveniste (1989):

Organizational learning does not take place only at the top of the organization. No. Learning takes place both at the top and at the bottom, at the center and at the periphery. If planning is to contribute to learning and adaptation it cannot, organizationally speaking, be isolated from those who are learning and who are stimulating new ideas, new approaches, and new demands for goods and services. (p. 127)

**Implications for change and adaptation.** As concluded by Duke and Associates (1992), one thing is certain for this native jurisdiction: There will be

change. However, the overall objective of providing better service to schools and communities in Northland School Division is timeless and will serve to guide a policy-development and implementation process which, in the words of Benveniste (1989), "seeks consensus while individuals learn to adapt. . . . In this kind of situation the . . . policy process can reduce uncertainty and expand management's ability to cope with change" (p. 17). The need for time for learning and adaptation identified by Benveniste is particularly important in consideration of MacNeil et al.'s (1981) assertion that

there does not appear to be any blueprint, at this time, as to what structural changes should be made in the future to make the Division a viable force in a unique situation. However, changes did occur at the time that the need for change was perceived. (p. 7)

With the decentralisation of the delivery of educational services to the local area, the potential for the local school board committee to become the most appropriate vehicle for filtration of issues and negotiation processes between the administration and the community was significantly enhanced. The benefits of an increased level of decision making at the community level are encapsulated in Elmore's (1988) words: "The closer one is to the source of the problem, the greater is one's ability to influence it and the problem-solving ability of complex systems depends on . . . maximizing discretion at the point where the problem is most immediate" (p. 12).

### **1993 Profile**

**The Corporate Board.** A decade has passed since the institution of the Corporate Board and the subsequent provision for elected L.S.B.C.s. A pattern of change and adaptation is evident. In 1993 a glance around the Corporate Board table suggests the emergence of a multicultural membership of the Corporate Board of Trustees. The continuing complexity of governance responsibilities is compounded by

the changing composition of schools in the division, the diversity of communities, the tenure of representation (relatively few trustees have remained on the board for multiple three-year terms), and changing representation of communities at the Corporate Board table (because the provision exists for chairpersons to nominate a member to deputise for him/her at the Corporate Board meeting). Although representation of communities at the Corporate Board table is characterised by change and discontinuity, an atmosphere of confidence and stability prevails. As described by one board member, "Everything comes together at the Corporate Board table. There are not too many problems that we cannot solve if we sit down and talk about them."

Meetings of the Corporate Board are usually held on the last Friday evening and Saturday of each month and are open to the public, except for in camera business. A large and comprehensive document containing the business for the board agenda is prepared and circulated for each monthly meeting. Agenda items include the adoption of the agenda, general matters, presentations and discussions, new business, reports from (a) the superintendent; (b) the chairman; (c) the *Education, Finance, Maintenance/Transportation, Personnel, Political Action, and Vision Statement* Committees; and (d) L.S.B.C.s. Business arising from committee reports and including L.S.B.C. meetings is unhurriedly discussed, questions and answers from the general-public session provide ample opportunity for public input, while an 'information items' section of the agenda provides an additional opportunity for communications. The Corporate Board meeting commences with prayer and is conducted in a professional, orderly manner and in accordance with the specifications of the prepared agenda, which also serves as a cumulative record of governance business addressed.

**A draft vision statement.** During the Corporate Board Meeting No. 93-4 held at Mistassiniy School, Desmarais, Alberta, on Thursday, May 27, 1993, the Vision

Committee presented a draft copy of a corporate vision statement. The committee stressed the importance of developing a vision with a three-pronged emphasis; namely, quality education, children, and community. Objectives of the draft vision statement presented on behalf of the Corporate Board of Trustees included

a commitment to sustaining the integrity and self-development of *First Nations children as First Nations members* while recognizing the cultural diversity within our community

and

a commitment to an active partnership with each community to provide meaningful educational experiences for each child entrusted to our care.

Subsequently, discussion of the draft vision statement by L.S.B.C.s produced the following responses presented at the Corporate Board Meeting held June 25/26, 1993, in Peace River:

I feel that it is not important to single out our *First Nations children*, as *they have been singled out enough*.

We are dedicated to *provide a quality of education for all children in the division*.

Rather than talk about interconnectedness of all persons as both learners and teachers, let's talk about *'balance,' 'harmony,' and 'shared experiences.'*

Significantly, these reactions concurred in principle with the responses of school administrators noted in the record of the administration meeting documented in *Board Agenda No. 93-5*:

Strike out "First Nations." This phrase does not have a global meaning. Put in *"development of all Northland children while recognizing cultural diversity."*

[The term] First Nations is exclusive rather than inclusive. We should *develop "all children."*

*Cultures are different, but underlying values are global.* (pp. 247-248)

**The administration.** The governance of Northland School Division by the Corporate Board of Trustees is supported by a strong, experienced, and predominantly nonnative administration staff. According to the *Northland School*



*Division 1993/94 Budget* presented at the Corporate Board Meeting on June 26, 1993, the cost of administration budgeted for 1993/94 is 5.36% of a total operational budget of approximately \$44,000,000. Revenues are secured from the provincial government (25%), the federal government (34%), taxes (26%), and miscellaneous sources (15%) (p. 3). The fact that current financial constraint has necessitated a significant reduction in the administration's 1993/94 budget is a precursor to ongoing change and adaptation. Concomitantly, the resignation of one area superintendent and the approved study leave for a second area superintendent have precipitated discussions regarding the possible amalgamation of at least two of the Area Offices into one administrative function. Approximately 2% of the administration budget is dedicated to Corporate Board and local school board costs. The Corporate Board of Trustees control a budget which includes trustees' remuneration, inservice, honoraria, travel and subsistence (board meetings, committee meetings, elections), Alberta School Board Association fees, printing and binding, travel insurance, advertising, office supplies, and awards. Each L.S.B.C. controls a budget for costs which include a recording secretary, inservice, honoraria, telephone, travel and subsistence, regional workshops, office supplies, and awards. Due to current financial constraints, decreases in the 1993/94 budget compared with the 1992/93 budget are Corporate Board (11.56%) and L.S.B.C.s (5.46%) (p. 37). As explained by a senior member of the administration, "Each Local School Board Committee submits budget requests, and the administration makes the cuts according to divisional priorities within funding levels."

### **Focus of the Study**

Within this sophisticated educational governance structure in 1993, what are the experiences and understandings of local school board members regarding the development of local school board trusteeship?

It is known that some local board members have served multiple three-year terms as trustees; many have held the position of chairman of a L.S.B.C. and the associated membership of a Corporate Board standing committee. Others have had the opportunity to attend Corporate Board meetings as observers. Wall (1987) claimed that "in Northland School Division Native people have played a considerable role in bringing change to the educational system even if, prior to 1983, they had minimal input where internal decision making was concerned" (p. 7). Is there a perception in 1993 by local board members themselves that the potential for elected trustees to secure "a piece of the action in the division decision-making process" has been realised? To address this question, the researcher adopted a naturalistic-inquiry methodological research approach to step inside the unique worlds of local board members in Fort Chipewyan, Wabasca-Desmarais, and Atikameg-Sovereign to share their understandings of the development of educational trusteeship as Northland School Division literally confronts the socioeconomic, political, and demographic challenges in its fourth decade of operation in northern Alberta.

The understandings and experiences of elected trustees to Fort Chipewyan, Wabasca-Desmarais, and Atikameg-Sovereign L.S.B.C.s are presented in separate chapters because it is deemed by the researcher to be important to recognise and respect the diversity among the three communities which are the foci of this study in one predominantly native jurisdiction. It was emphasised by Ghitter (1984) that "the native people (Indian, non-status Indian, Metis and Inuit) often have different goals and aspirations. Each group has a distinct history, culture and lifestyle" (p. 117). In a similar vein, Sergiovanni (1984) argued that "leadership and its organizational context are inseparable and thus it is difficult to understand one without the other" (p. 115). The reality of these assertions was discovered as the researcher listened to the stories of local school board members and realised the extent to which their individual understandings were intrinsically linked to their multiple realities of the

organisational context. In particular, their understandings and experiences of the history of their communities seemed to impact upon their individual perceptions of priorities aligned to a L.S.B.C. election in 1992, local and global forces affecting the development of local school board trusteeship, Corporate Board governance functions, and the organisation and practice of the L.S.B.C. In each of the next three chapters the participants' stories are juxtaposed with relevant historical data extracted from current literature.

## **Chapter V**

### **Fort Chipewyan-Athabasca Delta Local School Board Committee**

#### **Understandings and Experiences of Context**

##### **Geographical Location and Setting**

Fort Chipewyan is the oldest continuously inhabited European community in what is now known as the province of Alberta. A trading post which is now referred to as Old Fort Point was founded in 1788 by Roderick MacKenzie as a trading post for the Northwest Company. Since the 1970s when Old Fort Point was relocated to the northwest shore, Fort Chipewyan has occupied its present site on the north shore of the southwest extremity of Lake Athabasca 360 air miles north of Edmonton, just east of the boundary of Wood Buffalo National Park. A few miles to the west and south of Fort Chipewyan lies the extensive Peace-Athabasca Delta created by deposit of sediment from the silt-laden waters of the Peace and Athabasca Rivers (Ingram & McIntosh, 1980). This area was once known as the "Emporium of the North," as the entrepôt of the Arctic and subarctic fur trade (Chalmers, 1985, p. 12).

The community today extends approximately four miles along the shore of Lake Athabasca. Water, water dominates this northern landscape. However, the landscape is also dotted with granite hills and timber lines. It is said that the inhabitants of the area surrounding Lake Athabasca lived as "one" with the land.

Fort Chipewyan is an isolated community which lacks an all-weather-road connection to any other settlement. The community is serviced by Contact Air[lines], which facilitates connections to Fort McMurray and southern destinations on a daily basis all the year around. A paved road six miles to the northeast links the settlement with the airport. In summer boats and barges ply the rivers and lakes. From December to April a winter road links the settlement north to Fort Smith (Northwest Territories) and south to Fort McMurray, Peace River, and Edmonton.

### **Population**

Today local residents in this scenic town overlooking the lake estimate the population hesitantly as "around 1,200 to 1,500 people, depending on who is coming and going." Chalmers (1985) elaborated on the nature of the population in this isolated frontier community. "In 1960, its population totalled 12 or 1,500, depending on where one drew the boundaries of this amorphous unincorporated community" (pp. 12-13). As expressed by one participant in the study:

Until 1968 the Chipewyan people had their own territory, the Cree people had their territory, and the 'town area' was recognised as the 'territory of the Scottish Metis people.' Now everybody lives together; . . . a long battle, and this school is a symbol of that fight.

### **Local Organisations**

**The Cree and Chipewyan bands.** The Cree and Chipewyan treaty Indian bands constitute the largest percentage of Fort Chipewyan's population. The two bands once merged their respective administrative and management functions, but, according to one informant, "They split in the 'seventies and assumed two offices, so they're almost duplicating services again within the community." The functions of the two organisations cover economic-development projects, recreation and community development, Welfare administration, treaty privileges, and intraprovincial political functions. As reported by one respondent, "A lot of the Cree-band business has now moved out to the Cree Business Center, near the airport."

**The Indian Education Authority.** The Indian Education Authority is owned and administered by the Cree and Chipewyan Indian bands. The two chiefs are the shareholders in this incorporated body, and they appoint five directors.

**The Metis Association.** This organisation represents a minority of the population and has no permanent staff. It is not supported by provincial funding.

**The Local Advisory Committee.** This local body is the creation of the Alberta Department of Municipal Affairs and is known as the I.D. (Improvement District).

### **Perspectives of History**

The name CHIPEWYAN is derived from the Cree word CHIPWAYANAWOK. The name was given because of the way the Chipewyans dressed. Most men and women wore deerskin shirts with a point or tail in the front and in the back. The Crees really named Fort Chipewyan. (Brady, 1983, p. 8)

As reported by one respondent, "The first French people arrived here about 1780, and the first Scottish immigrants arrived in the early 1800s, . . . and they were segregated right from those times by their culture, by their work ethic . . . and things like that." In the 1850s when the first Catholic missionaries arrived in the area, they established their presence in the countryside. The Scottish Metis people settled in what is now known as the town area.

A formal treaty was signed between the government of Canada and the Cree and Chipewyan nations in 1899. This extremely significant event in the history of Fort Chipewyan was described by a board member:

At this time virtually everyone in the region had mixed bloodlines, and residents were able to declare themselves Cree, Chipewyan, or Metis [Scottish]. The choice was one of declaring themselves to be Metis [Scottish], taking their cash settlement [scrip] and securing all the rights of citizenship, or declaring themselves to be Indian, thereby forfeiting voting rights and standard rights of citizenship. It appears that most of the French people declared themselves to be Indian. Few, if any, of the Scottish families declared themselves to be Indian, and to this day they have retained the Scottish identity, although today they are mostly Indian blood.

Further discussion of this point suggested that Scottish men maintained a patrilineal type of family, so although they often married Indian wives, those women always moved into the man's family, and the children were raised as Scottish Metis. They were at the top of the socioeconomic scale.

Although it was claimed by some respondents that the Scottish maintained their culture, it was clearly indicated that the French and their descendants did not maintain their European culture. "The French men who lived in the area before 1900 . . . very often moved into Indian families, and they didn't call themselves Metis; . . . they were Indian if they married Cree or Chip women." Due to later events, however, this ethnic mix was to become even more complicated. In the words of one participant:

After the Riel Rebellion in 1885 when the Metis people unsuccessfully attempted to form a colony . . . first within the present Manitoba region, and then in Saskatchewan, . . . some French Metis families made their way up to Fort Chipewyan about 1920, . . . and the Chipewyan people took them in and gave them land. . . . The French Metis have been close to the Indian people ever since, and that's why there are French Metis people who arrived after the treaty was signed, . . . but all of the French people who were here when the treaty was signed became Indians.

In the early days of this century, people living in this region were part of the Northwest Territories federal government jurisdiction. When the Alberta province was established (1905), the Metis Scottish people living in the town area of Fort Chipewyan became constituents of the Alberta provincial government, while the rural Indian people continued under the jurisdiction of the federal government because the treaty did not give the province any jurisdiction over the lives of Indian people. According to some participants in this study, 1905 was indeed a turning point in the history of the development of Fort Chipewyan which "continues to impact upon governance arrangements." From that period onwards, divisions in governance and religion became a tradition which, according to one respondent, "significantly influenced local governance processes in the many years to follow. The other big division was the economic one, because the Scottish families worked for companies. They lived comfortably in the town and were the elite in the community for a century."

Fort Chipewyan was deemed by one participant to be

probably Alberta's largest community for about a hundred years, . . . and certainly Alberta's richest community for well over a century. Of course, in those days Alberta had no roads or railroads, so Fort Chip had minimal contact with the outside world. Languages? . . . Probably fewer than five percent of children speak their native tongue today, and yet you can go as close as the other end of this lake and ninety percent of the kids are fluent in all of their language and traditions. . . . That's an interesting thing, but this was a hub of trading activity. This was a mixing pot, this community, so it's a little different from a lot of native communities. That's what gives this community its tremendous strength, though, is that this community has had influxes of wave after wave of migrants moving in here who then moved on because it's hard to survive, and they've all left their mark; they've left their bloodlines and everything. And people here are very, very physically strong, much more than you would ever expect in a community this size. However, throughout all the development stages of the Alberta province, Fort Chip has remained distinctly separate with its own identity and with its own regional territory.

Much of the history recording the development of Fort Chipewyan is housed in the Fort Chipewyan Bicentennial Museum, which opened in 1990. "It [the museum] is a full-size reproduction of the Hudson's Bay Company 1870 stores building" (*Fort Chipewyan 1788-1988 Alberta Bicentennial Museum Brochure*). The museum displays native and historic artifacts which depict the key role that the pioneers of Fort Chipewyan played in Canada's early exploration and fur trade. This facility provided a rich source of data for the researcher.

Despite a high level of mortality during the 1918-19 world-wide flu epidemic, displacement to the town area due to closure of the dam on the Peace River in B.C. and constant struggles endured through divisions in culture, governance, religion, and economic standards for nearly a century, the Fort Chipewyan community has endured the struggles and survived. As explained by one participant in this study:

[Fort Chipewyan] is the last region in Alberta where native people still have basic control over their lives . . . and where Indian people are the majority in this region. . . . Indian people see this as an opportunity to be the only Indian community in Alberta to ride the crest of development.

Given the historical fact and continuing presence of four distinct and vibrant ethnic groups—Cree, Chipewyan, French Metis, and Scottish Metis (originally a



French derivation adopted by the Scottish in Fort Chipewyan)—Fort Chipewyan is a unique community steeped in an eventful and rich history.

### **Provision of Educational Services**

According to records displayed at the Fort Chipewyan Bicentennial Museum:

Education was an integral component of missionary work. In 1874 four Grey nuns founded the Holy Angels Convent. The Convent was a residential school. Some children lived at the Convent from the time they were babies until they left to go to work.

In 1874 a Catholic mission school was built. One respondent stated: "It was the first and only school in the area, so everyone who qualified for education or who wanted education went to that school." From 1920 until 1969 all Indian children living in the area were raised in the residential mission school. During this period it was alleged that "Indian parents basically did not have the right to rear their own children because the government entrusted this responsibility to the Church." One board member recalled his personal experience of this time:

I was brought up in a mission from age eight. I'd spend two months of the year with my parents. One time I sat down and tried to figure out how long did I actually live with my parents, and I came up with four years. Before that I was in the convent for eight years, and when I was younger I remember being with my grandparents all the time.

The long-term effect of the experience of residential school was shared by another respondent:

Well, I'm one of those [who experienced the mission], but I call myself a survivor, because I don't hate them any more; I'm over that, so as I'm healing, my family is getting stronger too. . . . The school was right inside the mission, so that means the kids lived there and they went to school there; they didn't go anywhere.

Although there was no formal provision for the education of Metis children at that time, one local board member offered this perspective:

The Catholic mission first opened their school, and a lot of the treaty kids went there. Well, they received funding from the federal government . . . for those kids to attend school. And it was really by the grace of God that any of the native kids went to the school because there was no funding,

but it was to the missionaries' credit, they did take in several of the native kids, and they did get schooling. When the Anglican people started the school, well, that was before the turn of the century too, well, some of the Metis kids did go to school there, and I think basically they probably got an education before some of the others did.

According to one respondent, during the 1920s when a severe influenza epidemic caused significant loss of life, the mission school population "was about 30 to 40 students." By 1950 it had increased to 200 students, and to 350 students in 1970. The school was rebuilt 'around the turn of the century' and again in 1940.

In the 1930s the federal government conducted an investigation of schooling in remote areas "to try and improve education for native children like Fort Chip children living away from reserves." In about 1940 the province built a two-room school for the non-Indians. The reactions to this development were described by a board member in the following words:

This marked another division which has become a tradition: namely, the provision of schooling by the Catholic Church and federal government for Indian students . . . and provision of schooling for non-Indian children by the province, . . . and that further segregated the community then because all Indian kids lived in the mission unless their parents lived in town, and all non-Indian kids went to the Protestant [provincial public school], . . . and there was a very strong hierarchical situation here. . . . This town's got very complex politics.

Another respondent provided a different perspective:

Basically it was a Metis town, and the government started moving the other people in, oh, the late 'forties and 'fifties because of schooling and medical services. . . . I think it was just a way of life to the people, that they lived in the bush and trapped, and they'd come into the communities at Christmas and in the spring maybe. And then when they did have the schools there, they would bring them in, up until the 'sixties when most of the kids stayed in the mission. Even if the parents lived in the community, they always put the children into the mission. So in a way they took advantage of it too, because it was cheaper for them to put the kids in the mission and let them [the mission] worry about the cost of feeding them and clothing them.

However, this action of relocating the Indian people at this time to the 'town' area was referred to as a problem by a number of respondents. In the words of one board member:

Oh, that's another problem Indian Affairs gave us. They slowly developed Fort Chip because the Cree band, for one, didn't have a reserve. The Chip band did, but [the reserve is] twenty miles out of the community, and all the resources for education, the school was here, the airport was here, and all the water and sewer treatment, so they developed it slowly and sort of forced the bands to live in this community. They developed [the community], and then slowly all the surrounding trappers and little communities slowly moved into Fort Chip and made Fort Chip home. I don't think it was by choice. I know a lot of people, a lot of the old people, would have liked it [the town] developed on the reserve, but over time slowly people moved here because all the services were here, the closest service that was available.

Although Fort Chipewyan had only two educational institutions in the late 1950s-early 1960s, the Catholic school and the provincial public school educational services were administered by three governance systems: A public school board represented the parents of students attending the provincial school; the Catholic school was administered by Indian Affairs; and a separate school board represented the parents of mostly Metis pupils who were attending the Catholic school. Neither the public school nor Indian Affairs was responsible for the education of Metis children, and many parents were unable to pay for schooling. So "a formal agreement between the separate school district and Indian Affairs provided the assurance that Metis pupils could continue to attend the Indian school" (Chalmers, 1985, p. 13).

In December 1960 the Minister of Education in Alberta established the Northland School Division with the intention to bring a number of school systems under the one jurisdiction. The effect of this initiative upon the Fort Chipewyan community was described by Chalmers (1985):

Because of financial difficulties, the official trustee of the public school district, the manager of the local Hudson's Bay Company store, was happy to have his district included in Northland School Division. By agreement with Indian Affairs, Moose also assumed control of the Indian school, and in so doing, became responsible for the education of children in both the separate and the public school district.

Northland, having absorbed the three Fort Chipewyan school systems (public, separate, and Indian Affairs), followed its usual precedents under the circumstances; it improved facilities, equipment, and services. Despite the improvements, the separate school trustees were never really very happy. In 1962, following the Northland takeover, the Division terminated the appointment of uncertificated instructors. The separate

school trustees, through their secretary, the parish priest (and the real power on the board), protested the appointment of five Protestant teachers in the face of the board's nomination of at least that number of Catholics. Northland replied that every nomination had been checked by wire, phone, or letter, and not one Catholic nominee had been prepared to accept an appointment. It was suggested that in the future the local trustees confirm the availability of their nominees before submitting their names to the Division. (p. 13)

In contemplating reasons for the establishment of Northland, one respondent provided the following perspective:

And I think years ago when Northland was first started, back in the early 'sixties, I believe, or late 'fifties, it was mainly just to supply education for the majority of the Metis people who were living in all these unorganised territories, and it's really mushroomed since then. And you know, until then a lot of those kids were not receiving any formal schooling, so it's been a boon to them.

However, as described by one respondent, perceptions of ongoing community division prevailed. "Northland School Division . . . took care of all the nontreaties, and Indian Affairs took care of the treaties, and it's sort of still just about the same way, except they're still fighting over funding."

Other respondents described increasing community conflict at this time: "When Northland took over Bishop Piché Catholic School, it meant that the province had the responsibility for the Protestant school at one end of the town and the Catholic School at the other end of the community." In the opinion of one board member, this created further community conflict because

by *that* time it was accepted that Indians voted for their own government [federal] and that all the provincial elections here were for the Scottish Metis townspeople. . . . Non-Indians. It was felt that the Metis people were using the Alberta government to maintain their rights and entrench their power.

Northland School Division attempted to secularise the Bishop Piché School immediately, . . . but this met with resistance. . . . It was a Catholic school, and the Church and the Chief together forced Northland to relinquish the school and turn it over to Indian Affairs.

Significantly, as recalled by one informant, at about this time the policy statement titled *Indian Control of Indian Education* published by the National Indian

Brotherhood in 1972 activated timely Indian interest and influence at the school-community level:

In 1972 the National Indian Brotherhood published a document titled *Indian Control of Indian Education*. Indian Affairs adopted that quite quickly as their buzzword, and the teaching staff adopted that concept, and between 1972 and 1978 . . . there was a steady development of influence in the school from the Band Councils.

In reminiscing about his experiences at that time, one respondent mused:

the Band Councils were rather disorganised in those days, except for the Chipewyan tribe that had a lifetime chief [traditionally, they had chosen chiefs for a lifetime], and he was the real leader for the Indian people at the time. . . . There were no other leaders at the time because for generations the Church had provided their leadership. By 1978 it had reached a point where the Band Councils had great influence in the school.

Nonetheless, during the period 1972 until 1983 the Indian bands progressively exercised a steady development of influence in educational matters. However, this was a difficult task, as observed by one educational leader involved in the schooling process at this time: "It was a rocky road coming out of the bush trying to run organisations for the first time . . . as it didn't move quickly, . . . but they had a sense and a goal that they would run their own education institution."

However, as described by one board member, there were multiple social problems at the time, and school attendance records were poor because:

between 1968, when [the dam] was closed, and 1972, all of the residents of the delta, which was about fifteen hundred Indian people, were forced to relocate into town. They had no housing in town; they were living in conditions with as many as thirty people living in a six-hundred-square-foot house; they had no income; they had no possessions; they had no food; they would have starved if government policy hadn't fed them. . . . We had a large population of students who didn't attend school, and [we had] rampant alcoholism and rampant social problems at the time because the Indian people's culture was a rural culture, and to move into town where they were at the very bottom of every social scale [because] they had no economy—it was totally shattered, totally destroyed overnight; millions of animals died the year the dam was closed and forced the people to abandon their life in the country. . . . At the time there was a debate among the non-Indian community whether they should have allowed the Indians into this town or should have forced them to build another town, and it was a very bitter [debate].

One respondent recalled that at this time a sort of informal spokesman of the Scottish people here said: "We have to help these people. We have to invite them into our town." Other people took a different viewpoint:

If we let them into our town they're going to wreck our town. You know what they're like and all this kind of stuff. As it happened, though, Indian Affairs bought a bunch of land right around the community and held it in trust for the Indian bands and started building about fifteen to twenty houses a year.

In 1976 a number of high school-aged children were attending school in other communities, and community pressure advocated for all resident high school-aged children to be catered for in one school in Fort Chipewyan. The experience of leaving the community to acquire high school education was described by one trustee:

I was under Northland School Division when I went to school. We didn't have high school here, so we had to go out of the community and live in the boarding homes. . . . That means that when I went out, because I *had* to leave the community to do my high school somewhere else, Northland School Division paid my airfare out in September and back in June, and they paid a boarding allowance to a boarding family for me to live there. But that's all we got.

Subsequent to the application of community pressure, an agreement was made between the federal and provincial authorities for all Grades 4-12 students to attend the Bishop Piché School administered on the mission site by Indian Affairs. Grades 1-3 students attended the four-roomed school administered by Northland in the town area. The effect of the simultaneous administration of two education authorities in this isolated community was described by one board member in the following way:

We had the two schools and two jurisdictions operating, that caused a lot of conflict in the community, and the population is small, but it meant that each school was offering the same services. When it's consolidated you have more scope to work in there with a larger student population. You can offer more courses and do more things that make it interesting, keep the kids in school. That's what we have to do.

In 1981 the Bishop Piché School (Grades 4-12) administered by Indian Affairs burned down. At the time, this school consisted of 21 classrooms and large physical education, industrial arts, and home economics facilities.

Kids set it on fire in the summertime; it burned down. It just happened at the same time the Chipewyan tribe was going through a process of choosing a new chief, and their process was very lengthy and difficult because, traditionally, they had chosen chiefs for a lifetime, and they'd only had three chiefs since the treaty was signed; in eighty-four years there'd only been three chiefs. The young people wanted a new system, and they were trying to force the older leaders to institute a new system, so there was disarray in the Chipewyan band. In the Cree band basically none of the older people in the Cree band were comfortable to try to be leader. . . . The Cree leaders then were people with very little credibility. Even though there were elections, there might be only thirty people who would vote in the election, even though there were five hundred eligible voters. People were elected . . . who were completely unfit for leadership. . . . So in the early 'eighties neither Band Council was able to deal with this situation of the school burning down, so they handed it to Indian Affairs in a formal resolution which said, "We want a new school."

Meanwhile, however, there was a section of the community that was saying, "This is the most awful thing that could ever happen, that the bands are building a school and running it, and we have to do what we can to prevent this, . . . so there were quite bitter feelings at the time."

The MacNeil et al. (1981) Investigation Committee, which examined the provision of schooling in Northland School Division at this time, reported:

At the present time two school authorities offer educational services in Fort Chipewyan. Northland School Division operates a school offering Grades one to three, while the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs operates Bishop Piché School for Grades four to twelve. Each jurisdiction has reciprocal tuition and capital agreements with the other. However, both school authorities serve the same community of treaty, non-treaty, and white pupils.

The Committee is aware of the events in the past which resulted in Bishop Piché withdrawing from Northland School Division, and the steps which have been taken since 1976 to bring about the present situation. During the summer of 1981 Bishop Piché School was destroyed by fire and the students are being housed in temporary buildings.

The Committee is of the opinion that this is the appropriate time for Northland School Division, the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, the Indian Bands, and other community groups and residents to explore the possibility of placing the two schools in Fort Chipewyan under one jurisdiction. Common policies, practices, and objectives for both schools are important if there is to be consistency in educational standards, services, and opportunities. Local involvement in setting educational objectives and initiatives for local responsibility for education would be enhanced if there were one school authority to focus these efforts. More resources would be available for educational programs, special services,

and curriculum development and adaptation. Northland School Division should take the initiative immediately in a joint examination of this possibility by all groups concerned. (p. 55)

Significantly, evidence of wide-ranging consultation by provincial and federal authorities with the community to determine educational direction in Fort Chipewyan is documented in the minutes of the Fort Chipewyan Public School Community Board (February 10, 1983):

**Feasibility Study. . . .** The Board was invited to participate on a steering committee which will conduct a feasibility study to determine community opinion about the direction of education in Fort Chipewyan. The steering committee will assist Indian Affairs and N.S.D. consultants in delineating and publicising the issues and animating public discussion of them.

In the meantime Indian Affairs provided 12 portable classrooms on the Bishop Piché School site, and the educational program continued. As described by one interviewee, "It was very difficult because all they had . . . was classrooms, no auxiliary facilities at all, and the mood of the community was quite bad for education, and attendance dropped about as low as sixty percent during that period." Further, the band's formal request to Indian Affairs for a new school did not secure community-wide approval, as "a lot of Indian people didn't support their bands at the time . . . or their administrations."

At about this time the report of the committee commissioned by the government (MacNeil et al., 1981) to investigate the entire operations of Northland School Division was released. Subsequent to this report, the government introduced legislation in 1983 to restructure Northland School Division. According to the minutes of the Fort Chipewyan Public School Community Board dated November 9, 1983, the legislation was widely discussed:

**Bill 58, the Northland School Division Act, was read and discussed. The Area Officer asked Board Members to respond to the idea of a regional meeting of several boards to discuss the Bill and draft a response to the Minister. The Board Members responded favorably.**



The Northland School Division Act (1983) allowed Indians for the first time to vote in a school board election and to be elected as members of a L.S.B.C. Nonetheless, this significant event was described by one participant in the following way:

the [government] did that in order that they could build schools, even for the reserve Indian communities. . . . The chiefs reacted quite strongly. . . . They didn't like it. . . . They attempted to stop that legislation. The chiefs' concern was that this legislation would strip the chiefs and their councils of any influence in education . . . when for ten years they had been developing their influence in education.

However, as explained by one trustee, the enactment of the 1983 legislation forecast a fundamental change in governance arrangements because

they [the Indians] were always under the federal responsibility, and [now] somebody was going to transfer responsibilities over to the province. And any time there's changes in that direction, there's always opposition by a couple of bands. I think that was the biggest problem there.

One board member recalled local and provincial opposition to the legislation at the time that the Northland School Division Act was passed in 1983. According to one respondent, the chiefs lacked local support and political power to oppose provincial government priorities at the time because

Cree people don't put a high enough priority on education right now to support band chiefs in a protracted struggle with the Metis leaders of the community. Also, . . . it was at a time when the Indian people were only just acclimatising themselves to town life, and they didn't actively participate in the government of the community. . . . That was seen very much to be the domain of the Metis Scottish people.

Nonetheless, the legislation allowed Northland School Division to set up a school board election in Fort Chipewyan. The understanding of one board member was that confusion arose because this event was considered to be a provincial election perceived to be for non-Indian people:

Because it was a provincial body . . . which had historically evolved as the representative body for the non-Indian people, . . . they perceived a provincial organisation to be for non-Indian people, . . . so they voted for non-Indian people. . . . I think they elected two Indian candidates to the Local School Board Committee. Also, a lot of Indian people didn't have much faith in their own people to be able to operate at that level at the time. . . . So . . . that school board elected [after the Northland School

Division Act] was virtually the same people who had been on the school board before Indians were allowed to vote for the school board. . . . It was a provincial local school board.

However, one other elected trustee provided a different perspective of the local school board committee:

Prior to [the 1983 legislation] we only had local organisations. We had a P.T.A. and we had a Home and School Association at one time. For people who were involved in those activities, it seemed a natural outgrowth to just carry it over into the local school board when they had their first elections.

### The first elected L.S.B.C.

In describing the circumstances of the first L.S.B.C. election, one participant stated:

There were hardly enough members nominated to even have an election, and I think the first couple of times, it was all by acclamation, basically.

It was considered by one respondent that the local school board elected in 1983 claimed that they represented the community because they had been elected in the biggest election ever held. Conversely, it was perceived by one board member that the first local board members' real agenda was

to preserve their identity at a time when their town was overrun by a large majority of Indian people who had no social network to survive in a town environment. . . . Their economy had been wiped out; . . . the wild life was destroyed; . . . and at the same time they were set free from missionary influence.

Nonetheless, the initial experiences of the newly elected local school board trustees were shared by other board members. The following reflections on the first elected L.S.B.C. in Fort Chipewyan describe a feeling of vulnerability:

- Well, I think the very first board that got in, we were just puppets for Northland because, again, we didn't really know anything; we just went in blind. But we'd talk about something that we were working only on information that they were giving us. . . . So, you know, they'd tell us something, and "Sure, great," and I really feel like personally I was mistreated the first year because I didn't really know anything, and I was working just on what *they* were telling me, and I wasn't getting things from other places. . . . The very first year that they formed a local school board in the community, I was elected on it, but that year

there was a lot of political stuff going on between Northland and Indian Affairs. . . . But that local board was used, I think, the first year; we were taken advantage of.

- . The first board was mostly housewives, and nobody really was involved in politics.

It was considered by one local school board member that the introduction of the 1983 legislation which facilitated the first locally elected school board in Fort Chipewyan was a positive step in terms of increased opportunity for parental involvement in education.

I think it meant that a lot of the parents became more aware of what was going on in the school and that they could participate in some of the educational processes that their children were going through. I think it was an opportunity where they could kind of, I suppose, broaden their outlook as well, and it was a learning process for everybody then: observers, and certainly the local school board members.

Nonetheless, it appeared that there was limited representation of the native people on this board, as observed by one board member:

Most of the board members were non-native people. There was a time when there was not one native person on the school board, and decisions were made for the whole town by a few individuals that didn't even communicate with the native community.

In the meantime, divisive community activity focused on the need for a new school building. Northland had offered to build a new school for Fort Chipewyan. According to one board member, who vividly recalled the activity at this time, "Within two weeks after their election the local school board announced that they were building a new school." The experience of one elected trustee to the first L.S.B.C.s was related with some feelings of disappointment:

We kind of got in there. Like, all of a sudden, "Oh, Northland's going to let you have some control over your school in this community." They got a brand-new board in, they gave us a little bit of what you can do and what you can't do, and all of a sudden they came in, "We need to do something about the school. Do you guys want a school?" We said yes, not thinking of all the political parts up there, and us being a little naive, I guess. And then, of course we want a school. The Bishop Piché School had just burned down. We had our kids in the community hall and all over the place, so it was, "Okay, Northland will build a school if you guys, can you do it?" I don't know, all of a sudden they put this on us or

something like this; I don't remember exactly how it worked. So we said, "Yes, we want a school. Let's get a school built," so Northland decided to start building a school. That's when all of this other stuff came in where Northland said, "We'll build a school," but yet they expected a whole big bunch of money from Indian Affairs to build it. The new board got in in something like September, . . . by January or February there was some kind of war going on between Northland and Indian Affairs about "What are you doing building a school?" and then *they* were going to build a school too. We were going to have two different schools and split this money. . . . And then I realised, "You used me." So I've learned, I think, a lot. I think we were used.

Negotiations between Northland School Division office, the Band Councils, and newly elected members of the L.S.B.C. were reported in the minutes of the Fort Chipewyan Public School Community Board of June 23, 1983: "The chairperson introduced Mr. Kinsman, who informed the Board of his efforts to have the local Band Councils act on a proposal by Northland School Division to build and operate a single school large enough to meet the needs of the community."

Concurrently, the two Indian bands were negotiating with Indian Affairs while Indian Affairs communicated with Northland. One participant reflected with some excitement:

But, of course, at the time the bands were designing their own school, . . . this was verified in the architect's report for the reconstruction of Bishop Piché School, . . . so that's why the chiefs hadn't dealt with Northland . . . or with the Local School Board Committee; . . . they were going to build their own school.

An excerpt from the minutes of the Fort Chipewyan Public School Community Board of November 9, 1983, stated: "07783. Invitation to Chiefs and Counsellors. . . . Motion that the Chairperson invite the local Chiefs and Counsellors and Indian Affairs officials to a Board Meeting to discuss the school project at their earliest convenience. Carried."

The early realisation of this plan developed by the bands to build a new school, however, was dependent on federal government financial procedures which provide for the annual allocation of capital dollars to each provincial region. With approximately 42 reserves to consider for capital funding, the reality became clear

that the building project would necessarily be staged over a three-to-five-year period. Conversely, the province (Northland) offered to borrow the money and build the school immediately. The outcome of this dichotomy of interests was described by one interviewee in the following words:

Three months after the architect unveiled a design for Indian Affairs in 1983, he was hired by Northland School Division to build a school in Fort Chip.

At that time the Indian bands served notice that they would not contribute any capital to the building of this new school, . . . and they reserved the right to build their own school in the future.

The apparent reason for this conflict of interest regarding the building of a new school was explained further by a board member:

Well, it kind of goes back to the politics in the community years ago with the two schools, because when Northland School Board first was elected in Fort Chip, basically it only worked with the public school, and then on the other side of town you had the Bishop Piché School under the jurisdiction of Indian Affairs. And all the students from Grades One to Three, I believe it was, went to the public school, and then from Grade Four up, the students all attended Bishop Piché, so there was kind of a tuition [agreement] entered into it even at that time. And I think everybody was afraid to take the first step to build a school, and Indian Affairs kept talking about building a school, but basically I don't think they had the money, and I think they really wanted to get out of education. So at one of the local school board meetings in Fort Chip they just took the bull by the horns, passed the motion to get a new school, left it wide open—if the treaty children wished to attend, they were most welcome to do so—and that's how we got the school, and we just proceeded from there. And then after the new school opened, well, just automatically—I shouldn't say automatically, but there was an arrangement so that all the students from all the grades attended Athabasca Delta [School].

Amidst community-wide interest and activity, the new school was built. It was opened in the fall of 1985 to accommodate all school-aged children in the Fort Chipewyan area in Grades 1-12 classes. Nonetheless, it appeared that not all residents of the community were happy with the new school, as conveyed in the following reaction of one respondent:

As a symbolic monument to the traders, that does offend a certain segment of the Indian population, and the physical layout of the school and the features of the school are very, very stressful. It's far more extravagant than any building ever built up to its time in Alberta as a school. . . . It was supposedly planned for four hundred students. It's got two hundred and fifty students . . . now, and the staff all feel that it's overcrowded.

However, another respondent provided a different perspective: "There's still some comments that the parents don't like to go into the school, but again, it's only coming from a very few people. I would not like to think it's the view of the majority of the people." This opinion, however, was not shared by another member of the board, who claimed with some indignation:

There's still a lot of bitterness, I think, about past issues of what decisions the school board made, like the building of the school on that site and the way the school is built, the construction of it. It looks like a fort. Now, a fort, to us, is to keep *us* out. You know, that guard tower!

The following year the new school was named, as reported in the minutes of the Fort Chipewyan School Board for January 22, 1986: "Motion 004-86. The name for the school be Athabasca Delta Community School. *Carried.*"

Although, retrospectively, a number of board members identified specific architectural problems with the new school, one participant applauded the fact that, for the first time in the history of Fort Chipewyan, all children attended the same school:

I can see some inconveniences. I think if we were doing it now we would maybe modify some of the plans inside, but I think the [one] school served a good purpose. . . . When it's consolidated you have more scope to work in there with a larger student population. You can offer more courses and do more things that make it interesting, keep the kids in school. That's what we have to do. . . . Overall, . . . it's got everybody working together as a community instead of having it kind of fractured with two subcommunities within the major one. And it is giving all the kids the same chance at an education, as they're all exposed to the same type of curricula now, which I think is good. We certainly have to give them the tools or the way to open as many doors to them as we can in the future, because sometimes you do wonder what the young people are going to do in Fort Chip because there really isn't much there for them to do. Most of them, if they get a good education, well, then they go elsewhere to work.

This concern about the architecture and the maintenance costs of the new physical plant was reiterated by other participants. The following comment by one respondent is an example of concerns expressed:

Also, a lot of people who work in this school or who know about buildings are very concerned about this building, about the cost of operating it. We don't know if we could afford to keep it open as a community-run school; our funding levels might be too low to maintain this building.

According to respondents, "The school is situated on reclaimed land which belongs to the province, is sinking badly, and is less than functional in terms of day-to-day educational routines. Northland School Division built a very sophisticated school which is an architect's dream, but it is 'an educator's nightmare.'"

In the opinion of one board member, the opening of the new school coincided with another important circumstance in this community: "About the time the school was built, the two Indian bands elected two very committed chiefs, . . . and they created the Indian Education Authority Limited as a company, . . . because in those days the Indian bands were not recognised as a legal entity." Within a short period of time the chiefs utilised this newly acquired legal authority to challenge the terms of the tuition agreement with Northland.

The chiefs immediately notified Indian Affairs that they wanted to rewrite the tuition agreement with Northland. It was difficult. . . . No one liked the idea that Indian bands had any authority over Indian Affairs money. . . . By the time the tuition agreement was signed in 1987, it had been through eleven drafts. . . . It was an emotional time.

The culmination of these negotiations was reported in the minutes of the Northland School Division Corporate Board Meeting of June 26, 1987:

Motion 14559/87—moved that the Board of Trustees authorise the Chairman of the Board and the Secretary Treasurer to sign the Tuition Agreement between the Fort Chipewyan Indian Education Authority and the Board of Trustees of the N.S.D. 61 and Her Majesty the Queen.

However, the deeper significance of the outcome of the negotiations with Northland was explained by a board member:

We negotiated with Northland to pay the tuition for the treaty students here, because in the past all the tuition payments, all the money, and all the agreements that involved the treaty students, and the bands were never directly involved with them. They had no say whatsoever; all the agreements were between Northland and the Department of Indian Affairs. We wanted input, so we wanted the dollars to flow from DIAND to us and to Northland based on the student count. At that time the bands wanted more input in what was happening in education. Now they're looking at another step further than that. . . . We get the money directly from Indian Affairs, and we in turn pay Northland.

**The second elected L.S.B.C.** According to one respondent, the second local school board elected under the Northland School Division Act was "mostly Indian." However, what appeared to be conflicts of interest between board members and the school at this time were evident—"student discipline and acute staffing problems evolved for two or three years." Another local school board trustee described this elected board as

a little bit more experienced. We had a couple of important people in there [on the board], I think. And again, one of them was the wife of the Cree band chief, and she was pretty powerful. . . . I think she had a lot of influence over things when she said something.

According to one participant, this local school board was required by the community to address complex and sensitive personnel business (staffing) in camera.

So there was a big thing happening there, and some people are still talking about that. There was a board decision that we not renew a [staff member's] contract, but it still came out [to the community], and it came from that one sour apple in the board members of the board that went out and went around saying the staff member was going to be fired.

The opinion of one respondent was that community reaction, support for the staff member, and speculation regarding outcomes heightened the tension and fragmented board operations at this time:

But still, it was a strong board. There were a couple on the board, though, who after we'd made the decision came out and said, "Well, I wasn't all for it. Maybe we should keep him; maybe we shouldn't have made that decision. We just weren't quite sure about it." So they kind of weaken you, because I think when a decision is made at a board level, fine, you support it. Even if you were the odd ball, you don't go out and say, "I didn't agree with it." What does that show if your board disagree amongst each other?



According to one respondent, this was a challenging time which led to discontinuity and difficulties in the maintenance of a leadership identity in the experience of the second elected school board. "By 1990 it was a nosedive straight into the mud. The School Board Committee couldn't even get a quorum to meet for several months. It had completely broken down; it was just in shatters." This assessment of difficulties encountered at this time was reinforced by the following comment of an interviewee: "I think we went for eleven months, we didn't have a quorum; we could hardly do anything." One board member speculated on possible reasons for difficulties confronting the school board during this phase of operations:

Well, I suppose lack of interest, other things to do. That was shortly after we had some bad times in the community, and I think it was almost a way of boycotting some of the things that Northland was doing. But it was very frustrating at the time, even for the school principal. He couldn't get kind of minor decisions ratified by the board. I think there were some instances where the concerns went to the Corporate Board, and they made the decision because nothing really was done locally.

A number of board members suggested that the management problems encountered by the second elected school board first promoted interest in the goal of community control of education.

I think it was about that time that the Indian Education Authority Board and the chiefs decided that the only way to straighten things out is for them to take over because they have proven that they've got the administrative ability to do it where no other organisation in town has that.

### **Understandings and Experiences of the Athabasca Delta**

#### **L.S.B.C. Election in 1992**

##### **Board Members Motivated by Personal Values and Community Influences**

Within a community-driven surge of interest in the Athabasca Delta L.S.B.C. election in 1992, an unprecedented number of community members accepted nomination for election to the L.S.B.C. In conversation with six of the seven candidates elected to the L.S.B.C., it became evident that wide-ranging experiences

and influences motivated people to run for election to the school board. Some candidates identified themselves as prospective board members because of unfulfilled personal aspirations for a good education, adverse experiences in mission schools, increased commitment to supporting their children, and/or a sincere desire to help improve education for the community. Other candidates were recruited by the community because it was perceived that they were "educated," "astute politicians," "experienced board members," or "honest and vocal" people who would represent community interests well. Other candidates were identified by the community because it was perceived that they would "push" for community control of education.

As suggested by one board member:

We have a real mix of reasons why people do enter the different elections and decide to run. I think the majority have a genuine interest in the future of their kids, and they're interested in what they're going to do and trying to help them. There's a few that have run for board positions simply because they've got a kid in a certain grade. If they had a problem this year, "Well, I'm going to run for the school board next year and fix things."

While, collectively, board members offered a range of personal reasons for running for the school board, the underlying motivation appeared to be aligned with values placed upon education. This theme was highlighted by a number of respondents:

- Education is a priority for me. For us to get anywhere, we have to get educated, so my interest in being a board member is education. The priority to me is education.
- I wanted an education, I wanted an education. I thought that education was important; I needed it; I went for it. I remember one time that all my friends were coming home and I had to stay in Edmonton because I had one more year to go, and that was a hard thing to do, to say goodbye at the airport, and then they were leaving, going home, and I was there. But I'm not sorry now.
- I think basically I've always been interested in education in the community. Well, I have children of my own, and they all went through the school system as well, so I felt that maybe I had something I could offer that was needed in the community at the time that I was and still am involved.

- Well, I wanted to be involved because I thought there was a time coming where there was going to be a great need for education, and I knew there was going to be a time coming that our native people are going to have to get up there and start—how would you say that?—coming forward and being teachers, being counsellors, being nurses, do something with their lives. Don't just sit there and expect everybody else to do it for you.

One board member explained that the desire to help children motivated her interest in becoming a board member:

I put my name in, and then last fall it came to a vote then, an election, and I said, "Well, I have nothing to lose. I'll put my name down." I did, and I guess I got [elected]. . . . I've always had an interest in children because, being a mother, . . . I was very concerned about their education and their way in life, you know? I want to make sure that I give them the best.

In recalling her own experiences of education in this community, one board member was motivated by the hope that she could 'make a difference for other children' by being on the L.S.B.C.:

I think there's a lot of things that when I went to school that I didn't like, and things [like] the way I was treated that I didn't like, because back then there was . . . just the mission school here, and most of the kids in the community lived in the mission, but I was considered what you'd call a town kid, because my mother stayed in town year 'round, although my dad did go out trapping and stuff. So I was a town kid. Most of the kids were treaty, and there were just very few Metis families.

Yet another board member considered that it was important for native people to be models for the community:

I think the community looks to you as part of them. You know, your example speaks louder than words. Even if you are not out there, and the fact that they see you occasionally and know how you live, there's a great respect. . . . But I think that we can communicate, I think, better with the natives than a white person coming and trying to communicate with us. The [the community] feel closer because they know part of me is part of them, so I felt that maybe if I sat on the board [I could] represent the mothers, especially.

As the following comments suggest, other board members were motivated because of school-related experiences with their own children:

- Because I had two children going to school; so I used to go down and meet with their teachers and see how they were doing, especially at report-card time."

- My kids! I said, "There's something wrong. I don't even know who is teaching my son. I haven't even checked." I think it was the turning point. . . . I started looking at who we were getting as teachers and the procedure of the hiring. . . . I wanted some input.

The need to have more input into the development of educational policy motivated two board members to become involved with the local school board:

- I guess, like other board members, I am concerned at the way the school is run. I like to have an input into how the disciplinary policy is set up to make it more effective, because right now we're having a lot of problems with the children just using that policy so that they can get a holiday, and if we're to bring in stricter rules, finding other ways how to deal with these problems, I think the school would be a better place for the children to be in right now. It seems like they get so many warnings, and they're staying at home for four days on a holiday. When I grew up there was no such thing as being suspended. . . .
- They asked us to each give a short speech why we want to be a part of the school board. My belief was always to have a better education for children and make sure that the policies were looked at, and I was more upset at the disciplinary policy, the way it was set up. The only people that were benefitting were the children because they can get away with a lot of things, and the teachers didn't feel safe at all because from one minute to the next you don't know whether you're going to get charged with assault, and it makes it really difficult for them to be able to teach anyone, be able to feel comfortable in the room, where they'd be able to teach without being threatened.

A number of board members cited the quest for local control as their reasons for involvement in the local school board. The following testimonies convey the degree of commitment to this objective:

- Some of them didn't campaign, [and] they weren't elected. Of the seven elected, the majority of them stated in their campaign platform that they want more local autonomy, or, flat out, that they want local control.
- I really believe in local control. I believe the whole community should have local control over our education, because we know our children, we know our community, and most of us know what our needs are and what we're lacking.
- Last fall there were nominations for the school board for the next two years, and I thought about it, and then I thought, "Well, I wonder if I should commit myself to this." A lot of energy and whatnot involved in there. I think what made me decide to run was the talk of community control; I like that idea. I don't like the idea of us answering to a corporate board made up of twenty-six other schools with all different issues because of locations and all that, and nobody

happy about anything. The distance is too far. And also my kids and the future of this town, where it's going. The only way we can do that is by making the school a happy place for the teachers, for students; an open place for the community where you don't have to feel shunned when you walk in the doors, you don't need an appointment to go to the school.

The following claim made by one board member describes the altruistic motives expressed by recently elected board members for accepting their positions of trusteeship: "Whoever runs for this board is running out of concern; they want to do what they can. I don't think people run for this school board just for power. I think they all intend to improve things." This conviction is reinforced in a further comment which implied that maybe the realisation that 'things' can be improved by local school boards is motivation in itself for campaigning for election to trusteeship responsibilities:

This last election . . . it did have a lot of people running, more than most past years, but that's good. It shows more people are getting interested, where before they just said—I think all that goes back to the mission: They do what they want to do; you had no say anyway, so go mind your own business. But now it's really changed, and it's nice to see all those people taking an interest in education.

### **Heightened Levels of Community Expectations**

As indicated by one interviewee, the election of the 1992 local school board in Fort Chipewyan was a significant process in that, for the first time ever, 12 candidates campaigned for election to one of the seven positions on the school board. Board members interviewed presented a wide range of understandings about the expectations of voters. Some board members perceived that the community voted for people who could represent them well at the local community level, as suggested by one respondent: "I think they expect you to support them in the things that they want in the community." According to one trustee, the community expects that people elected to the board will have a good education, management skills, and a record of achievement:

- I guess what they look for, really, is leadership.
- A proven ability to manage—manage an office, manage a job, or whatever; good communication skills, that they communicate with a good number of people and that they're respected, their ideas are respected broadly, at least by their constituents; an ability to talk to more than just their own personal clique or group of friends; a good education—maybe not a university degree, but someone who's recognised as having educated themselves or become well educated; somebody who's known for accomplishing things—having accomplished things is the number one prerequisite now for credibility in this town, because so many people have died and given up and sunk in the effort to reorganise the society. So few people have succeeded that those who have succeeded have very high credibility, and even credibility beyond what they're due, often, and expectations beyond what they can deliver just because they've succeeded or handled more than they can handle. That often happens.

A perception by one participant that the community voted for candidates who were committed to community control of education is encapsulated in the following response:

Those people with the will and the ability to work towards community control; to be able to represent the whole community, not just their facet of the community; . . . people who can be fair, because justice is a very important quality to be able to consider the total needs of a very diversified community, particularly in policy and decision making. Newly elected board members must be prepared to develop community-education programs to meet the needs of the community.

Other board members claimed that the community wanted people on the local board who would articulate persuasively and persistently:

- I think [the community] expects people to be able to stand up for the rights of what they believe in for the school, and if you don't have people that are vocal, then you're going to go unnoticed. I think I've showed them more than once that I'm very vocal at whatever I believe in, and that's one of the reasons why I got in.
- Somebody who's vocal and who speaks their mind and is honest is considered to be a good board member. Not just sit there and don't say anything and just sort of go along with everybody else, because I don't think you're putting an input into it then; you're just somebody sitting on a seat.

Two board members believed that the community voted for board members who could represent the community in the community and beyond the community:

"Someone who can liaise between the school and the community, and the community

and, say, the corporate division, the Big Board"; in fact, a leader, as suggested by this respondent:

I guess what they look for, really, is leadership, a person that will be there to speak on anything that's brought to their attention and be able to address them in any meeting, such as Corporate Boards, where a lot of times issues come up and they have to have long discussions on them and everybody's got a different opinion on how it should be done, and you kind of wonder.

However, this understanding was not shared by one board member, who stated:

I think the majority vote for their friends and their family regardless of what they do, really. Sometimes I think which group you belong to in the community has a bearing on how many votes you get as well. A lot of the parents, I don't think they really sit down and look at the issues involved, and if somebody comes along and says, "Vote for me," they will probably.

### Unprecedented Interest in a Competitive Election Process

The election of the 1992 local school board in Fort Chipewyan recorded a significant change to previous elections in that approximately 12 candidates campaigned for election to one of the seven positions on the Athabasca Delta L.S.B.C. "But this present board actually, for the first time ever, campaigned for election. There were twelve candidates." Individual understandings and experiences of the election process were shared by a number of the elected board members:

- They have a voting day where you can go, and whoever you would like to see on the board, you can pick six people that you want to see on the board. It's all done by secret ballot, and at the end of the day they open the ballot box to find out who's got the most votes, and I guess the six top people that get the most votes are elected to represent the school board.
- Well, sometimes people will come up to you and say, "Are you going to run?" And if you do want to run, you have to fill in a form saying, "Yes, I'm willing to run, and get some people to sign it, saying, "Yes, you probably would be good; you should run." So if you can just sit back and you think, "Well, geez, I could really help out this, and I could do something," and you wait for somebody to come and ask you, "Do you want to run?" well, I wasn't prepared to do that, so I just said, "I want to run. Will you sign my form?" So that's what I did.

- Prior to the election, parents who stood for the election campaigned, and there was a community vote. . . . Some people didn't campaign; they didn't get elected.
- I didn't promise anything; I didn't advertise. I just thought that if [they] believe in me, well, they'll vote for me, and all I did was encourage people to go out and vote, and that they cannot complain if they don't go and vote. It's their right, it's their duty, and if they care enough for the kids, well, they'll make that extra move. And we had a really good turnout. So I got on, and I felt pretty good.

### **Multidimensional Views About Representation**

It was the considered opinion of one local board member that "the board must guarantee representation over all the three major ethnic groups in the community." However, board members' perspectives of the 1992 elected board's actual representation of all community groups ranged from "widely representative of Chipewyan, Cree, and Metis people" to "very little representation apart from treaty members." The following understandings expressed by individual board members further explore the question of representation:

- They're elected members; people chose them, and they represent the community. I mean, obviously the people see some hope in them, and that's why they're elected, and then they represent the community.
- I think we did get over two hundred voters out to this last election, and I think that they did elect a group of people that fairly represent the different segments of the community.
- [The local board] has been elected by the community, every faction of the community at large. It doesn't represent any individual group; it represents the community, period. We work for the benefit of the community or the good of the community, not for the good of individual bands.
- Oh, they have to be [seen by the community as representative], because if they're seen otherwise, there's something wrong with the system, because it should not be seen as band owned or Metis owned; it's got to be seen as community owned.

However, one board member linked the dominance of native people on the board with progress: "There's a lot of native [treaty Indian] people on the board now. The majority are native people, which is a true sign that we are moving ahead;



we're getting the people to back us up." Other informants, however, expressed some reservations about the question of representation: "So the majority is Cree and Chipewyan, whereas before it used to be seven Metis and white." This complex issue of representation was further explored by a participant:

I suppose basically it is [representative], although . . . most of them are treaty members, band members, on the board; so there's very little, really, representation, say, from the rest of the community. But in a sense, to me, that's one of the drawbacks of the local board, because it is a provincial jurisdiction, but there isn't really, in a sense, representation from the provincial population in Fort Chip. I don't know just quite how to say it, but if the band people were to get together they would have the majority on the school board, and all the decisions could be made with their aims, their goals in mind.

Despite the diversity in the understandings of board members regarding the question of representation, the following assessments provided by a number of elected trustees suggest the pursuit of cohesion and common purpose:

- I think that the whole group there is attempting to be very diplomatic and work with each other.
- A very credible school board of achievers; . . . a good blend of managerial, professional, political, and tradesmen skills; . . . recognised achievers who can pursue a goal; . . . all reasonably diplomatic; all have a big interest in the community, *and* most importantly, represent the whole community. . . . The current board has great credibility. . . . It would be hard to assemble a better group of leaders.
- The sense of ownership is there. This school board committee is the first to start assuming authority; . . . discipline policy, for example. . . . Student conduct is being brought under control; . . . the demand is coming from the community.
- And the board now, I think everybody in there at some time or another has been chief or councillor or just people that have good positions in the community and I think have a really good awareness of the politics behind things all the time and know to question things and the consequences of some of the things that you do, how it's going to affect different organisations; whereas that first board didn't think like that.

According to one respondent, new patterns of election to local school board governance are emerging, due largely to a development of community interest and understanding.

It's changing, and I think the last couple of elections it was as many as sixteen people running for local school board members. So it means that there is more interest developing in the community, so I think that's all to the good, because when people understand it more, I think we have less problems to contend with then, and you get everybody working together.

### Eclectic Board Member Learning Strategies

According to board members interviewed, the purpose of trusteeship was to represent the community in the best way possible to improve educational services in the community. Each board member recognised a need for individual and collective learning and development, and a range of strategies was cited. Some board members described the efforts provided of Northland School Division to familiarise newly elected board members with role responsibilities:

- Well, the first thing, I remember at our first meeting Northland gave us a big package, *The Roles and Duties of a Board Member*, c.c.'ed to twenty-five other schools coming out of Peace River. Well, of course it was all fine print, so nobody read it anyway.
- Actually, we just kind of had something given to us, I think, that said, "This is the power of the local board. Instead of Northland just sending in teachers to you, you'll have a say on maybe which one you want to hire. You get to pick which days you're going to start school, which days you're going to be finished," and they started off with the responsibilities like this. So slowly we were kind of told, "These are your decisions."
- I had access to information about how Northland School Division worked, how our funding came, where the policies come from, and just information like that that I never knew before.

One board member exercised her own initiative and asked questions of senior personnel in the division.

I don't know if he was an assistant superintendent or what, but he would come up to our meetings every month, and, yes, I asked him, because, like I said, I'd been under Northland for quite a few years while I went to school, and I wanted to know, Why this and why that? Will Northland pay for this? Well, how come they won't pay for that? And I would just ask [and find out that way].

However, one board member respected the need for board members to be told what to do:

Well, right now a lot of people are telling us what we need to know, so we're still going that way because they're telling us. But, yes, we need to know. What do we need to know? What do we need to know to control this school? What do we need to know about teachers, money, Alberta Education? We have to learn all that. You can't just give it a school and say, "Here, run it." What are we going to do?

According to one respondent indicated that the responsibilities of trusteeship required a formal approach to board member learning and development:

It's important for everybody to know what their roles and responsibilities are. I don't think the principal or any of the administration staff should be in that position to tell you what your roles and responsibilities are; you should already have an idea of what you're getting into, but also have a refresher course just to be sure that you know what your roles and responsibilities are, not just attending meetings and approving and disapproving things; there's more to it than that.

As suggested by one board member, the L.S.B.C. recognised the need for support in this area and arranged for the assistance of external resource personnel:

We went through a mission statement, what kind of a mission statement would we like to see for our Fort Chipewyan school. And then again, somebody [a resource person] was brought out for that, and we went through all of the different steps until we got down to a mission statement, and that we really need, and just things like that.

As conveyed in the following comments, some respondents suggested that expertise and experience on the board could assist the learning process of other members:

- There's people that get re-elected, and once they know what to expect in one way, they feel more comfortable about it and can help new board members.
- I think a lot of people that are in there are already sitting in different boards and know what the roles and responsibilities of a board member are.

One board member indicated that his attendance at Corporate Board meetings provided a good learning experience: "You get a lot of good information on how even to chair a meeting. There's guidelines to how you chair a meeting, how you address the chairperson." The development of this latter skill was considered important in representing one's community well at Corporate Board meetings because

"if you have a concern, whenever your time comes up you're given an opportunity to speak, and you see a lot of people just waive their opportunity away because they don't feel comfortable [about speaking]."

On a broader organisational level, some respondents suggested that training workshops for the newly elected board are an important way to ensure board member learning and development:

- We had no training of any kind, sitting on the school board, and I think it would have been a good idea for the future if they had, say, board members' workshops, you know what I mean, because it's kind of hard all our life going into something that we're very naive about, and I think workshops do help.
- There's training workshops that could be taken, such as the roles and responsibilities of board directors of *any* organisation, so they kind of get an overview of what the roles and responsibilities of a board member are. That's one of the most important things, is to have one of those, even if the board, half of them have been re-elected.

However, one board member appeared to question this approach because

most board members work. They have other lives during the day. They're voluntary members of the board; and, while training programs could be organised, the actual contents of those programs really have to be considered carefully so that training is consistent with the aspirations of what this board wants for this community. A good board chairman will help board members develop by getting cohesion and working together for common interests.

Nonetheless, in recognition of board member responsibilities associated with their objective of community control of education, a number of respondents expressed a need for management training:

- I think the local board still needs more training. We have started some, but there's just so much. We're just at the stage now of knowing about all that we have to know before we can take over, so now we have to start to get these little trainings in for the local board members, so it needs to build up my confidence, anyway, because there's a lot there that you have to do; there's a lot of responsibility you have with local control.
- In fact, we're pushing for board training where we'll have facilitators coming in [to do simulation workshops]. They'll throw ideas or whatever at us and say, "Well, what will you do?" Or situations where there's an angry parent that's gone to the school and punched a teacher out, and you have mixed feelings because of families ties in a

community like this and "How do you react? How do you see it? How can you resolve it? How can you be an ambassador to all those people, and still come out a good guy?"

A number of board members suggested specific areas of learning and development that should be addressed in community-based workshops. One participant stated:

I think we have to learn a lot more about budgets, funding agencies; even to learn about exactly what you put in place. We know we're going to have to get a superintendent, but what do we want that superintendent to know? What does that superintendent have to know? Even little things like that. We've already started things on policy-making workshops, interviewing skills.

Another respondent continued:

In discussing how the transition [to community control] could happen, . . . we know that we need a lot of training in school boardmanship. Working with successful Indian school systems down south and their superintendents, we've been advised that it'll take as much as perhaps fifty full days of training workshops and meetings to prepare a school board to be able to function relatively smoothly. . . . The outline that we prepared starts with dealing with some specific problems, . . . because dealing with those specific problems will give the board a sense of accomplishment. Also, effective meetings, effective communication [workshops] to understand the Alberta curriculum; policy development—perhaps as much as thirty days of meetings for policy development; staffing procedures and policies; and so forth. . . . This present school board can be part of all the training and can facilitate a smooth transition.

A further avenue of learning and preparation for board member responsibilities adopted by this L.S.B.C. is the on-site visits and observations of other native-controlled education systems. As explained by one participant:

We can learn a lot from others, . . . so we're going on a trip at the end of the month to the other end of the lake [Saskatchewan], and these are the people, like I said, that only speak Chipewyan. Well, they're running their own schools. They're that much further ahead of us.

## Understandings and Experiences of Local and Global Forces

### Affecting Athabasca Delta L.S.B.C. Development

The participants in this study individually described a myriad of interactive community-based forces and influences external to the community which affect board members themselves and/or the operational development of the L.S.B.C. Some board members believed that earlier personal experiences in this community influenced the development of perspectives held today.

### History-Laden Values

For one board member, experiences during childhood formative years influenced her current attitude towards the community:

I liked growing up in this community, because you knew everybody, you had freedom, everybody's your friend. I never had any enemies, even though I was a Metis child. I was referred to as a town kid, but so what? I referred to them as mission kids. That's just the way it was. But we all grew up together in acceptance of each other, and then because a lot of people stayed or some of us that left returned, we had a better appreciation for the community once you leave it for a while. I think we still have that common ground, where we all grew up together. As I was growing up I didn't really feel—my parents never stopped me from playing with whoever I wanted to play with; there was nothing there to put any bad ideas into my head. Our friends were our friends. We'd all lived together in the same community, and that's the way it was. So I still have some of those friends that are still here that are involved in a lot of other different places.

The effect of childhood experiences for this board member was explained in this way:

So I think that's where that common ground comes, so there's some things that we might argue about and don't see eye to eye, but when it all comes down to it, we all stick together, and that's where I think the local school board can work for everyone in the community.

For another board member the experience of moving to Edmonton for Grade 12 education has accelerated her aspirations for the local school board:

There was a cultural shock, and I went through turmoil also, just totally awed at everything happening. I liked it in one way, and it was so scary in another way. The discrimination part was something I'd never experienced, and I just rebelled and I got really bitter, but I survived the first two years, and then my Grade Twelve, I just couldn't. It just started

bottling in on me. . . . I just had enough; I just missed Fort Chip, so I went back in January, and my dad sort of knew that something was really bothering me. I told him I didn't like Edmonton, and he said, "Well, we're always here." So at the end of January I saw the counsellor, and I remember him saying, "You've only got five months," and I said, "Do you know long is five months up in the city for me?" I said, "I just can't. No, I've got to go." And I regretted that moment; I still regret it. I mean, I did get my Grade Twelve, but I had only five months, but I couldn't do it, and I wouldn't make—they called it "sacrifices" and whatnot.

In many instances the personal struggles associated with historical events, such as relocation, indelibly written in the minds of some board members, were identified as a force which affects the development of local school board trusteeship. This is graphically portrayed in the next quotation:

This town has grown, and it has, because there's no more people living out on the land; everybody has moved into town. The building of the dam and the delta drying out and the animals, or Greenpeace doing their thing and succeeding, and putting a lot of trappers out of business because there's no money to be made out there now; social changes as a result of people being moved into town, into trailers and a trailer park, having to do what? There's no jobs, and what do you do—sit around? Social problems started, and alcohol and family violence have just been on the increase, and that was a pretty rough time for this community. There were a lot of deaths related to alcohol in every kind of way; orphans left. A family of seven kids were orphaned on Christmas Day. . . . So we just hit rock bottom, and from there now we're starting to climb out. I think that really had a lot to do with what's happening now: people all having to moving into the community, and then building their lives, starting over, basically, and having families in the meantime. Kids that have left the mission, not even speaking their own language because they're ashamed to, with memories of what the Catholic Church did to them, and that's basically how I think of it. . . . And we're coming around, and more and more of those survivors are becoming the leaders, and we're the ones that are speaking out now and are being heard . . . on the local school board and other boards.

### **Changing Cultural and Family Values**

One board member suggested that the loss of cultural skills and changing values are also penetrating organisational life in Fort Chipewyan today:

I'm pretty well friends with all the Elders, and now we're losing them so fast, and with them so much of the culture, even the stories, because our stories are passed down; it wasn't written until the written language came out, so there's a lot of stories that have got a lot of knowledge of herbs

and medicines, and even the skill of making moosehide now is going because people don't want to get their hands dirty; it smells. And making dryfish, and the skill of preparing for winter. All through summer you're gathering; we were gatherers and nomadic people that just travelled and cached our food. And if the fishing was good we just made dryfish by the hundreds and stored them for winter; we got a moose and made dried meat and put it away for the winter. In the falltime you collect berries, because we know the winter is long and it could be really hard and cold. And the way people pulled together at times; they worked together; people shared. If we got a moose, no matter if there were thirty families, everybody got a piece even though there was just enough for one meal. Now you get a moose, well, you're lucky if you send a plate to your neighbour. Those values are all gone, the value of sharing and caring. Now everybody is too materialistic: "I've got to have this; I've got to be like—" The white man's culture, I guess, is what's more important now than the traditional sharing and caring. Orphans weren't left to be tossed around in foster homes; someone took them in. Old people then weren't sent to the old folks' home to die by themselves; family kept them. And those values are gone.

This opinion was shared by one other respondent:

There's a change. I don't think the respect is there that was there in the past. That's something that we have to take care of. That mission thing might have something to do with it. . . . I've noticed that people who lived in a family environment for a long time and were never in a mission, . . . their family relationships are a lot closer than ours.

However, it was claimed by one local school board trustee that the Elders continue to have an influence in this community:

They play their own little role. Elders, you'll never get them to talk or tell you anything when you ask questions. If they don't want to tell me anything, they won't tell me anything. They'll tell you at their own time. You've got to be listening to them at all times, at any time. You can be walking down the road and they'll tell you something, and you've got to be ready, got to watch it. My trick is to go down to the post office, sit down and discuss whatever.

A number of board members identified changing family values as a force which presents a unique challenge to the L.S.B.C., particularly in view of emergent values that parents are passing on to their children:

- We're the mission generation: We were brought up in the mission; we don't even have the experience of living in a family environment. Personally, I think we try to give our kids more, and they get away with a little more than they should, stuff like that. . . . Or maybe it's a guilt deep down . . . or something like that.



- Their parents and their grandparents all didn't have an education and live a certain way, and they're satisfied with that; that's all they want, and there's no push, and there's no push to stay in school, and there's no push to go out and do something more. It's like, "This was good enough for me," but I think most people in the community know now that they can't live off trapping because there's nothing left out there, and there needs to be something else to do. And now fishing, we don't know how many more years that's going to last, and that's just seasonal, and what are people supposed to do?

Nonetheless, the understanding expressed by one interviewee was that such attitudes impede community progress and achievement:

What do they see as important to them? And if that family has completely given up hope and "I'm not getting anywhere in my life now. I'll just wait for my welfare cheque, and I'll have a party for a week after, and then I'll sit around, and maybe I'll go hunt some chicken," but that's what they're showing their children, too, because I think, like I said, somebody's got to get in there and push a little bit.

One board member contended that the L.S.B.C. has a significant role in guiding parent interaction and influence with their children:

Nowadays with education it's different, but yet they still have time to learn a few things from their parents, and there's so much lost art today; it's a dying art. They're trying to revive it, but to me, the best teachers in the world are your mom and dad. You are the first teachers of those kids, and if you're not there for them, you missed an awful lot, because those kids believe, and you only remember the good things, and you only remember what your parents have told you. Those stay with you for life.

### **Changing Community Attitudes Towards the L.S.B.C.**

The opinion of one board member was that as people in the community became more aware of the value of education, attitudes towards the L.S.B.C. were gradually changing:

I think the community is just finding out . . . what a school board is because of the past and the way it was controlled by a few. . . . In a small town like this it's pretty obvious. Like the Metis and the whites, they represented the whole community, whereas they were only about twenty percent, and the rest were all native. They represented and talked for the native people, and the native people didn't care or weren't aware or had no interest or anything; totally left out. It's not that any more. I think the people in this community are now becoming aware of just what education is. I remember old people telling their grandchildren, "Education is no good. You'll never go anywhere. You leave here, that's it; you'll never

come back." And with the school being an unfriendly, unwelcome place, there were a lot of dropouts, and I think the people are finally realising that even if they get a job at Syncrude as a labourer, you've got to have your Grade Twelve, or else the only thing you can qualify for is a seasonal firefighter, or if you have your own boat and that and a fishing license, you can make ten thousand dollars in six weeks if the weather's good. Trapping is out unless you become a tour guide or something. Good luck! You can stock cans at the Bay, at the Northern, that's all. That's finally coming into place, and now a lot of those people—not the Elders and not my generation, but the next generation—are where the dropouts really—I mean, there's always been dropouts, but I think our children—not my children, but the next generation, the people in the thirties and the ones that are dropping out—are all going to have a skill. They all quit; they did senseless, unmotivated jobs, sort of; and now they realise, "Well, hey, hold on. I can't do this for the rest of my life." So with those people being aware of how important education is, the school board is feeling it from these people saying, "My kids need help. I don't want my kids to go through what I went through."

According to one board member, the community has higher expectations of the L.S.B.C. these days. It expects elected trustees to really be accountable to them.

The community's more involved; the community is more vocal; they're not afraid any more. They're coming out in the open saying, "Look, the changes have to be made." Parents are getting more involved—not as much as we'd like them to be, but it takes time.

It was contended by one trustee that one of the biggest challenges confronting the board is

living up to what the community expects of them. You know, you're always trying to promote the community concern, and yet when you're involved, you know that it has to be weighed against the concerns of the other schools in the division, and of course we each think our own concerns should be number-one priority with the board. And then if we bring forth something from the community, very seldom is it ever turned down, but if it does happen, well, then, it's pretty hard to kind of come back and tell the community that, "Well, we didn't get what we wanted this time," whether it's a boarding-home allowance or a cutback in the budget or another teacher that we want but we can't get.

A further influence at the community level pertinent to the development of L.S.B.C.s identified by a board member was a perceived attitudinal change of school personnel coming into the community:

The teachers that they're bringing in now I think are, you know, better understanding of the community, and they're more open to trying to meet the needs. I can remember years ago when we didn't have a high school in the community and we were trying to get one, whether it was by

joining together or whatever, and in the end that's how we got it, was that all the high school kids would go to the one school. But we had the principal from the public school stand up at a meeting one night, and he says, "You people don't need a high school here," he says. "The kids can't do it anyway." Well, my hand was just raised and I went after him, and I said, "How can you say that, because until the students have been given a chance, you don't know what they're going to do." . . . Those attitudes are long gone!

Overall, the reason for this increased community interest in L.S.B.C.

performance was aligned to a recognition of the board's purpose and authority:

I think it's really been the last three or four years where they're starting to realise that the local school board is a force that has some power and can help shape the future of what is happening in our schools in the community.

### Views About the Isolation Factor

A number of board members cited the isolation factor as having a negative or a positive influence on the development of local school board trusteeship. For one board member, the isolation factor protected the community from unsolicited influence and action:

I mean, how many people would pay to come up here unless their trip was paid for? So we like to think of it as the chosen few that can come up here, whether you have your fare paid for or you come up on your own. So that keeps us unique in that sense. They may call us isolated; I like to call ourselves unique, because if they push a year-round road into this community, then we become just like Peace River, where ten thousand vehicles can drive in and not leave a buck, but take whatever they could and go. You give us a year-round road; that'll happen to us. The community's talking about a year-round road, and just what do we want? ~~That's~~ That's a big issue because the government is saying it's going to cost us ~~this~~ many millions of dollars because it's all delta. . . . So we're saying to the government as a community, and the school board even talked about it, "Instead of you giving, you *doing* it for us, let *us* do it; let us tell you how we want it. We have experts; we have old people, Elders, that know this country so good they will tell you how it's easier to travel. Instead of *you* giving it to us, let us tell *you* what we want," and I think that's how this community is thinking now. The government gave us, you know, we had the Heritage Fund when Alberta had the boom; they gave us a paved road from the airport to town; and then a few years later they decided to give us running water, so they tore up all that pavement they put in and put running water into every home, and then repaved the road. And they gave us an airport. We didn't ask for it; they just thought they were doing a good thing for Fort Chip; you know, politics. I mean, sure, it has

the advantages, and even I, as much as I say that, I don't think I could go without my toilet; I don't think I want to go outside in January! I like just turning the tap and getting some water. I like that! . . . But as a community, I don't think we want somebody to do it for us.

As perceived by one local board member, the isolation of the Fort Chipewyan community affords the community an opportunity to develop and control their own education system in "their own way."

However, the perspectives of other board members identified negative aspects of the isolation factor. As one respondent reflected, the lack of community vision and the deprivation of resources can be high costs borne by isolated communities:

Other people that live in the bigger centres—Fort McMurray, Edmonton—see that need for education, and they go for it and they go for it, and they take it a lot more seriously. I mean, some of the people living in Fort Chipewyan do. I mean, they encourage their children to stay in school and go on to university, and you need to do this. There's a lot of career counselling, and more generations of educated families, where here there aren't. And even with myself, like I said, I just have Grade Twelve and some college after that. I'm trying to help my children find a way to get sponsorship and what courses they need to get into what they want to do and stuff. I don't have all that information, but I'm still capable of going out and digging for it because I know who to go ask, and I don't see myself as a backward person or somebody who's shy to go and ask, and if they don't know they just don't say anything. And there are a lot of people like that here, too, who just wouldn't go push a little bit. But that's the hard part; I'm still struggling with that one.

A further perspective associated with the isolation factor concerned the difficulty encountered by board members in "knowing what's possible" through exposure to the wider environment. As one board member explained: "There's no vision, . . . seeing what's possible. They don't see it. . . . They don't feel a need. They never had it, so what do they want it for, kind of thing." Further, the opinion of one participant was that the level of informed leadership in the community was affected by the isolation factor:

A lot of people from here who have finished their Grade Twelve have left the community, so there are some of us out there who are quite successful in our jobs and have good positions and stuff, ~~but~~ there's not enough.

It was suggested by a respondent that the isolation factor often has negative implications for students:

Grade Twelve [students] do most of the subjects on their own. There's no competition; it's just kind of "Do it." And what have you got to compare it with? There's nothing, no drive. . . . If you were somewhere else you would be around a lot of educated people and all these different professions around you. *Here* you ask a little kid what they want to be and, oh, . . . it's a nurse or a cop or a teacher or chief, . . . because they look around and that's all they see.

In recognition of the disadvantages of low enrolments in Grades 10-12 in this isolated community school, one board member resolved to overcome this problem:

Well, personally, I'm trying to get a school here that will go from K to Nine, with the high school education outside this community, either in Fort Smith, Fort McMurray. A lot of parents have access during the winter to both locations; it should make it a lot easier. But they've got to go as a group, not one student going. I tried it with my kids; they couldn't do it. The way we survived [was], I think we supported each other.

### **Community Politics, Division, and Conflict**

As reported previously, Fort Chipewyan has a long history which depicts the various phases of interaction between the continuing presence of four distinct and vibrant ethnic groups in this community: Cree, Chipewyan, French Metis, and Scottish Metis. Although patterns of incremental change have dominated the record books, "the kind of twisted and contorted history" described by one respondent has left scars of division and conflict. The complexity and the significance of 'clans' within the four distinct ethnic groups is explained by one board member:

Yes, because in a community like this, so unique with the Cree, Chipewyan, and Metis, you also have in *those* clans, family clans. For example, a Chipewyan marries into the Cree band, and the Treaty Number is Cree. . . . That person is a Cree band member because the Treaty Number is Cree, although usually recognised in the community as a Chipewyan. . . . They all have these family clans. The Chipewyan band, which has about three hundred members, but not that many living here, are all interrelated in some way. The same as for the Cree band. We have a lot of relatives in the Cree band just because of the way the treaty was made. It goes 'way back.

The implications of this were described by a trustee in the following way:

So . . . even though we were elected board members by the whole community, . . . there's backgrounds to consider in all these things. . . . If you look into the family, you'll see them all mixed. . . . There's families all over town like that. We've all lived here, and this community is two hundred years old, so if you go back a generation or two, you'll find some of that other—so everybody's really mixed.

The effect of the activities of clans over a long period of time was translated by one board member in the following terms:

At times I feel that it's almost every individual family for itself, and each family thinks that "My family takes priority, and everything I want for my kid, we should incorporate into the school or into the curriculum, or this is the way it's done." And I think we have to be careful because in a small community it's pretty difficult sometimes to keep everything on an even keel. And when we've had problems with individual families, and it comes over through the school board and they use their position to get what they want. This is one of my biggest concerns why neither local nor community control, that until we outgrow our own little petty jealousies can we treat all the kids the way we should, you know. And it has caused serious problems in the past for us.

Although the board collectively attempts to address these problems, this is often a challenge, as reported by this trustee: "The board has tried [to solve this], but when some of the problems stem from board members, that's where it gets difficult." In particular, it was asserted by one trustee that conflict of interests often causes division:

When you get their children going to school and they say, "Well, my mother or my father is so-and-so," you know, they're using the political positions to get what they want individually, and this is where I think our biggest problems have come. We had one bad spell, but I think we worked that out pretty well. There's been a lot of progress in the last, I'd say, four or five years.

A further division originating from the ethnic multi-identities is associated with traditional governance allegiance. As explained by this respondent:

People who are constituents of the Alberta government believe that their only protection is the Alberta government, and they're attempting to use the Alberta government systems to keep their community going the way they think it should. The people who are federal constituents, who are almost all Indian, want their governments to dominate in this community, and that's been the tug of war in these elections: Who is going to get

elected—a group that supports Northland, or a group that doesn't support Northland? When Indian people have been elected they've tried to work within the system.

However, according to one respondent, the degree of political activity emanating from governance orientations is extensive:

That's the basis for a lot of the politics, because you get the federal government involved and responsible for the treaty people, and then the provincial government comes in and they're responsible for the Metis people and the nontreaty section, and then we also have the local governments, like the improvement district office. They have an elected board, and we get the band chief and council. . . .

Right now nobody on the I.D. board is on the school board. Last term there was. So it kind of varies: Sometimes there are, sometimes it's not. But there again you get into situations where you get the majority of treaty people on the I.D. board, and they tend to want to make decisions for theirs, and the ironical part is, the provincial money saved in transportation. They're not supposed to run a grader through the Indian Affairs subdivisions, and here they are, "Well, why not? We need our roads ploughed." And it's kind of silly, you know, one community, you get all those petty restrictions on it that way, and yet you can go to a social do and get rid of all the political overtones. Everybody's related anyway, you know; you forget whose group you belong to.

Notwithstanding this community's ability to manage the political activity during social interactions, the understanding of a board member forecast the possibility of ongoing political challenges for the local school board:

Right now the Metis local get left out, or the Metis people, because they can't compete with the bands who've got all the money to spend, and the Metis local don't get any funding from the provincial government. If we have a dance, we raise a few hundred dollars, and that's our budget for the year. But this is one of the concerns. You know, if it even goes community control, there's no tax base in the community, and our concern is, who is going to pay the tuition or whatever goes along with educating the nontreaty children in the community? I think that's our biggest concern, is what happens to them?

Further, in pursuit of the ongoing quest for community control, one informant conveyed the following understanding with an intensity of purpose:

The two Band Councils have notified the community in writing and notified Indian Affairs and notified Northland that they want control of their own children's education—that's three quarters of the students in this school—and privately they're saying, if the non-Indians run any interference at all, if they don't cooperate, we're not going to argue; we're just going to build a new school and abandon this one.

However, the perception of this plan was not necessarily shared by all board members, as is evident in the following comments:

- When you live in Fort Chip, you're a part of the community, and we do things as a community.
- With the support of the local school board, and all the local leaders of different factions in their community, and we have that support now, I can't see a problem. It'll take time to get that control, but it will happen eventually. It depends on the [focus of the] local school board's support. Well, we will support community control, but we'll not support band control. It's got to be community control. We do not want to split the community, one favouring over the other.
- We have to get together, I mean, try not to split. There's people out there that don't want changes; [they] want their own [way] but the majority wants a collective body.
- Some people, they'll consider related issues, like, "I'm not Indian; I don't want that school" or "I'm not Indian; I do want that school." . . . That's really going to be the hardest part of this whole transition, is to get the different groups in this community to agree to work together. It would be much easier to just separate everybody and segregate them, but then we get into long-term conflicts, and a lot of us are trying to build bridges rather than burn them, . . . but it often breaks down into fighting and factionalism and people just losing interest and no quorum and that type of thing.

As indicated by one interviewee, the achievement of this goal of unity has magnitudinal implications for the development of the L.S.B.C. and for longer term community stability because, if there is a further division into education services,

we get into taxation issues then: If it's built on provincial land, then Indian employees working here will be subject to income tax. If it's built on federal or reserve land, those same employees don't pay income tax to the federal government or the province, and that's becoming very important in all of the development of native communities in Canada, the taxation issue, so these are very difficult issues to deal with in a community like this.

Such community-based political challenges require strong leadership by the L.S.B.C. This recognition at the local level precipitated some political lobbying prior to the election, as explained by one respondent: "Before the election we worked very hard to convince Indian people to run for this school board who would have the support of



the Indian governments, who would be able to manage, . . . and who would take some advanced training."

The opinion of one board member, however, is that such struggles for power should be resolved through a demonstrated commitment by L.S.B.C. members to community goals: "They should relinquish, at least for the purposes of being a board member, those particular commitments to any singular band or culture or both and really work towards a unified community control." The understanding provided by one participant suggested some progress in this area:

I think it's slowly doing that, yes. I don't know just how to put it, but some of the incidents that we've had to contend with in the past kind of stemming—they were actually basically power plays, you know, from one or two individuals. It hasn't gone the way they wanted, so I think that the board is working to overcome some of that—thinking of the board as the power object, not just the individuals on the board.

Although the attributes and aspirations of the four distinct ethnic groups in Fort Chipewyan maintain a lively vigilance over community affairs, historical fact indicates that common goals are often pursued collectively. As reported by one board member:

There's lots of little [divisions], yes, but when it comes to anything like when we want a nursing station, it doesn't take long for all the groups in the community. It's a common thing; we all want it; it's a common goal. The lodge was built, the multiplex was built, we got an airport, we got this, we got that, and it's things where the whole community said, "We need that." It's kind of like, even if you look at different families, there's under there somewhere, usually conflict between somebody or another, but it doesn't mean that you don't like them. It just means not everybody sees eye to eye and sees things the same way, but when it comes to a problem or something, definitely, everybody will work together.

The best example of collaborative action, in one respondent's view, is evident during a time of community crisis:

The community pulls together at a time of disaster. . . . Even though we have our ups and downs about this and that, something political or crazy, at a time of disaster the whole community just pulls together, especially the three groups. So we know it can be done. We just have to go further than a disaster.

### Challenges of L.S.B.C. Relationships

An ongoing challenge confronting local school board members is that of establishing and maintaining productive working relationships with school-based personnel. For some respondents this challenge was focused on existing communication strategies, as described in the following perceptions:

- The local school board right now, too, depends on the information we get from the [school], and if the [school staff] don't tell us anything, sometimes the school board doesn't find out things, and we'll find out somewhere else. I see some of that happening right now, and I think we have to learn not to just take them on their word, on what they're telling us, which we should be able to do, but sometimes they're not telling us the whole truth, so we have to learn to question them a little bit more.
- I think the school staff should be completely honest with us with something that has happened, and not just keep it at the teacher level and talk about it there and everything. I like to see things just, "If you have a problem, let us know; we'll deal with it," instead of just, sometimes there's, again, the stirring going on there amongst the teachers, and you go to the board meeting and you kind of sense something's happened. Like, all of a sudden there's twelve teachers in the room and you wonder, "Okay, what are they up to now?" And then the next time there's one [teacher there].

As indicated by one respondent, local school board meetings are public meetings, and school staff often attended when the monthly meetings were held at the school:

We usually have a lot of people. . . . However, the board has their meeting in the ID office now, whereas before we used to have it at the school, and the school's a comfortable place for the teachers, who are isolated from the community.

The attitude of some board members towards the teaching staff in the community is described in the comments that "teachers come and go" and "generally isolate themselves from the community."

The following comments indicate that the board members would like to see more interaction between school personnel and the community:

- I respect them for having the knowledge and education on being a teacher, but yet, they don't understand the people here. They're all from all over the place, but they're certainly not from this area, and sometimes it's sort of like a teacher will get you, like, "What do you know?" And because I guess it's all perception, they see it one way.

- Right now the teaching staff I find is living in their own little bubble. I'm trying to reverse that, get them introduced to the community. They don't mingle with the community. You can't just go from whatever working hours you've got in your job and then that's it, you disappear into your house and are not involved with the community. You have to be involved with the community, that support and the respect of the community.

The comments of some respondents suggested that some board members saw a need for mutual co-operation in attempting to bridge this alleged gap between the school and the community:

That's why I say there should be more communication; not only meet because of a board meeting or a school board meeting, but meet to get together. I was saying that to one of my board members: We should do something for the teachers so we can meet with the teachers, get them involved to get to know the parents better, get to know the community a little better. But the thing is that our teachers don't stay here long enough.

Another local board member suggested getting together for "dinners and potluck suppers and the informal stuff."

In the opinion of one trustee, the school also had a role to play in establishing better interaction:

They should give open house more often, get an open-door policy, atmosphere in the school. They're trying that; they've been trying that for years, but a lot of native people are afraid; they're not comfortable with white people, especially the older generation. . . . Flashback to the mission days, . . . no trust. Indian Affairs is probably one of the biggest reasons why. They make a lot of promises and never come through with them; . . . a little leery about people with forked tongue!

An example of this apparent ongoing lack of trust and mutual co-operation was evident in the following perspective explained by one interviewee:

It seems to me that teachers think, "This is the way your kid should do, and this is what you should do, and this is the way you should act." But if you look at it from the community side, and if you've been here all your life, that's the way they've always acted in this area, that's the way I acted when I was a kid, and what's the big deal? I'm not talking about bad behavior, but it's all down to culture, kind of.

As identified by one participant, the outcomes of ineffective communication strategies obviously affect school board interactions—and affect overall educational objectives:

I don't know, sometimes I think the teachers and the board don't look along the same way. We were trying to get the discipline policy out. There seemed to be a lot of talk in this school amongst the teachers that "There's no way this is going to work and that's not going to work," and the board would say, "Come on, give it a try. You have the community behind you; you have the support. It can work." I think that the people on the school board do know our children, and we know what'll work with them; again, because we raised them.

Notwithstanding the school-L.S.B.C. interface difficulties perceived, according to a board member, the local school board fulfils its role responsibilities in terms of its oversight of school operations:

There's policies that we follow to make sure that they're being enforced, and more or less overseeing that the whole school is running properly. The principal reports to us in monthly reports and gives us a rundown on how the school is doing for the past month. We have some control but not as much as we would like to. I think we'd feel more comfortable where we have our own policies set by our own community and everybody agrees to them.

As suggested by one respondent, local school board members do visit and spend time in the school; however, this is not a mandatory requirement for trustees, as was communicated in this response:

I don't tell my board, "You have to be there; you have to go there." I mean, it's up to them if they want to go. It's available to them, but I don't force them; I don't think I should. They have their own mind. If they want to deal with it their own way, let them deal with it their own way.

A possible reason for this arrangement was conveyed in the understanding expressed by one respondent:

Again, there's kind of a line there sometimes that's hard to step over. If we kept going into the classroom, then the teachers would really feel like we're picking on them. We sort of have to have trust there a little bit to do their job. . . . and that sort of takes a bit of time to build up.

I feel it; I feel that way, because I feel like when I walk into somewhere where there's a teacher, I'm a school board member in the room, and I'd like them to just get to know me as a person and relax a little bit. I'm not going to go jump on them for everything, because they're just people too. I mean, they're not gods.

Nonetheless, in the words of one participant, the considerable progress is helping to overcome these barriers because a number of strategies have been adopted by the board:

Local school board members go into the school and work . . . because the board is very supportive of students. The different committees, . . . the Personnel Committee and the Discipline Committee, those work with the teachers, . . . but more as a committee, I think, not really as an individual.

As explained by one elected trustee,

For example, a discipline committee was set up. It was set up as a workshop, getting the community involved, also with the staff and the school board, and they broke up in different groups for different areas to cover, and a lot of good ideas came that were used to change that, to amend the policy. So the school worked with the board; the school staff worked with the board.

According to one board member, who stated that this is "how it should be," the establishment and maintenance of productive working relationships between the board the school are mutual responsibilities:

It doesn't matter to me what parents say; I'm one hundred percent behind my teachers, because if the teacher has twenty kids in that room, and she gives them work to do, and there's two or three that's just wasting time fooling around, that teacher is spending more time trying to keep those three kids quiet and do their work, and not giving enough time to the rest of the class. This is what's happening, I'm sure, because there's some kids there are awful, but yet parents don't see it that way. Parents always, always, well, it's easy to point fingers; it's easy.

Although most of the board members interviewed described various influences within the community which affected the development of L.S.B.C.s, there were few examples of forces external to the community mentioned, apart from those associated with resources and governance.

### **The Influence of Government Restraints and Cutbacks on Resource Levels**

In identifying influences external to the community, the perspective of one respondent was clearly articulated:

I don't think anything outside the community influences how we operate. We operate at our own speed, our own time. The economy could go under, and we're still living at seventy, sixty percent employment. It doesn't affect us whether the economy goes up or down. The only change that may affect us is provincial budgets, stuff like that, provincial regulations, laws changing. In that sense it would affect us, but how we're trying to achieve our goals, what happens outside this community doesn't affect it. We're trying to achieve our goals in our own time, in our own time frame. It will take time. I personally don't look out there. I look out there for the support for the resources to achieve those goals, and I know we don't have [the resources] yet in this community.

The dependence on a continuation of the external provision of resources was also identified by another elected board member:

The big one right now is the government restraints and cutbacks financially. And I think for some communities they want new schools, you know, new infrastructure and whatnot. It may be a while coming now, but I think in our situation we're pretty lucky because we have a good school. It may need some repair work, but we've got the facility there and a place for the kids to go.

### **Bureaucratic Barriers**

For other board members, some aspects of Northland School Division Corporate Board governance presented challenges to L.S.B.C. initiative and decision-making responsibilities:

I don't believe Peace River should be making decisions for what happens here. Peace River's a whole completely different area than we have. We have a local board, but what decisions can we make? All we do is, we make recommendations that we have this, and we *still* have to follow all Northland School Division policies, so what we do is make a recommendation, and then it still has to get approved by Peace River, so I don't call that control.

Other board members cited examples of governance outcomes determined beyond the control of the community which they perceived as affecting educational opportunity and standards in the school community:

- One of our biggest problems is travel, and kids want to travel. We have the high cost of airfare, and it has to be approved by the board, and then it goes to the Corporate Board, and we ask for more travel money. "Well, how come *you're* asking for more travel money?" "Well, we're isolated, and you guys can even go by bus; we have to fly," that kid stuff, and airfare is so expensive, and this kind of meaningless bickering going on.
- And the curriculum and the discipline policy; . . . this is a community that I argue isn't Edmonton or Toronto; people here don't live by the same values as professionals in the city or whoever, and the culture should determine the direction, but Alberta doesn't believe that. Alberta wants everybody to think the same. They'd just love us to be nice, urban, Protestant people, . . . if we would only open our eyes and do it.

However, some board members defended the wider governance structures. It was claimed by one respondent that representation had improved as a result of changes to governance structures:

Once there was very little contact [with Northland] in the sense that we hardly ever saw them, and there was not as much talk then as there is now about taking our concerns to the meetings, because it was this group of government officials meeting in Edmonton. . . . I believe in the beginning that each of these appointed trustees was supposed to represent a certain area of the division, but . . . so help me, we never knew who our representative was. . . . Then they moved the office to Peace River. . . . That was the first step in kind of getting closer to the people that they were supposed to be representing.

The overall implications of the central administration operating out of Peace River are "difficult to assess because it's a new concept to Northland too, this place as an organisation. And with the distance and all the travel involved, too, it must be pretty hairy for them at times." Nonetheless, in the expressed opinion of one respondent, the positive effect of this wider governance structure is manifested in identifiable indicators of progress such as:

Northland has done a lot too for the teachers in the community. They've built a lot of new teacherages and houses, and even at home our teachers are staying longer now than they used to stay. Some years all but maybe two or three would leave out of our whole teaching staff. Now it's the other extreme: I think we've got two or three teachers leaving this year. So that's nice, and it gives continuity.

### **Understandings and Experiences of the Corporate Board Structure**

The Athabasca Delta L.S.B.C. is represented on the Corporate Board of Trustees by its chairman and one or two observers at the monthly meetings. Most of the board members interviewed had attended at least one Corporate Board meeting. However, the perspectives of the Corporate Board governance shared by the respondents varied markedly and included negative and positive understandings of functions.

The opinion of one respondent was that a uniformity of policy in such a diversity of contexts is inappropriate.

And the biggest problem with Northland is, it has twenty-six school board members from twenty-six very diverse communities. You've got oil communities, lumber, trapping, isolated communities like this, communities on the main highways, a whole wide range of different cultures and economics and situations; and the school board won't approve any unique policy for any community. Any policy has to apply to all communities, and it makes it completely ineffective.

The format adopted for the monthly meeting of the Corporate Board was described by one participant in the following words:

These vastly complex meetings, [where] they introduce minutes from twenty-six school board committees and pass them. They deal with the superintendent's problems; they deal with parent delegations. You can imagine how diverse it is when you're spread across an area as big as all of France, and with just as much diversity.

Other trustees were "unhappy about [staffing policies], the selection processes, the quality of teachers, and the general policies that are developed and formulated by Northland School Division for implementation in 26 school communities." In a similar vein, another L.S.B.C. member regarded the provincial philosophy guiding Northland school administration as a restriction to L.S.B.C. operations which the community did not appreciate.

There's no way for this community to deal with its problems except to somehow magically all become wholesome people who agree completely with the Alberta government philosophy, and that isn't about to happen.



So we're into another phase now where a . . . majority of the community . . . doesn't believe that Northland School Division is a workable organisation.

### **Size and Complexity**

According to one local board member, the size of the Corporate Board of Trustees was unnecessarily cumbersome:

I find the Corporate Board is too large. They have twenty-six members, I think, or twenty-five members, somewhere in that neighbourhood. Anything over twelve is too large, and everybody wants a piece of that same pie. It doesn't work. We've put a lot of money in that Corporate Board, and I think we could operate more effectively at the local level.

In the opinion of one participant, the efforts of the Corporate Board to share the "pie" often cause representatives of L.S.B.C.s to compete aggressively:

Attending the first Corporate Board, I thought, "Oh, geez, it's nothing but a big argument!" Everybody wants a piece of the pie, and you want to be one of the first ones to say, "Yes," you know, and give them why you want your piece of pie.

The suggestion of one respondent was that the perceived problems associated with the Corporate Board governance could be addressed through a regionalisation of L.S.B.C.s, a significant structural change for the division:

[The Corporate Board] would be a good structure if there were changes made, if there was more control locally, and maybe get the boards a lot smaller, maybe a regional board, representatives. For Area Four . . . I would work it, say, Fort Chip . . . maybe on their own. Anzac, Janvier, they're all within that one very close region. Anzac, Janvier, McKay would have one rep. Or McKay and Anzac would have one rep, and Janvier and Conklin would have another one. You know, downgrade the people to a smaller group. Twenty-seven is too large; anything over twelve is too large.

Although regionalisation of L.S.B.C.s may precipitate the possible erosion of localised input for those communities absorbed in a regional structure, the respondent was confident that each community would be well represented

as long as you have the regional input. I know all our goals are basically the same. I see it at the corporate level. Some are ready to advance; some are afraid; some I see are still taking directions from Chief and Council, even though they were elected by the same group of people that

are represented in the education field. . . . Education is a priority, I know, to everybody at that corporate level. They're at different stages right now, but eventually . . . . I know their goals are basically the same, yes. . . . Education is a priority to them.

### **Management Strategies**

Although the L.S.B.C.s have clearly defined powers under the Northland School Division Act, Chapter N-10, 1, the level of decision making by the L.S.B.C. is deemed inadequate by some board members. The comments of two board members clearly convey this conviction:

- We have to abide by Northland's rules, and you have to go through the Corporate Board before you get any kind of approval. It seems like you don't have any control of your own school. If we take over, then we'll be able to set our rules and policies, and then the input is coming from the community, not coming from anywhere else.
- More input locally, but it's not enough; we find it's not enough. All we do is make recommendations. [It is unsatisfactory.] We have to make recommendations only and then find out that our recommendations are not [approved] because of other reasons or financial reasons or whatever the problem might be. We need control here to be effective.

The procedures adopted by the L.S.B.C. and the Corporate Board for managing recommendations was described by one interviewee:

When the Athabasca Local School Board Committee records a specific decision for the community it goes in our minutes, and either our chairperson, or if he doesn't go, somebody else goes to Peace River once a month for the Corporate Board meetings, and they're made up of all the different chairpersons from all of the communities. And then the motion is brought up [at the Corporate Board meeting], and it's up to them if they want to pass it or not. Usually when they do pass something for one school, that means it's passed for every other school, so even though we are a unique school in a unique community, any decision that is made out there, they can't make one just for this school.

According to one respondent, all submissions from L.S.B.C.s are thoroughly investigated and discussed at the Corporate Board table and prioritised in accordance with identified overall needs of the division:

The Corporate Board of Trustees read through all the meetings of all the schools, school board meetings, and they have to be approved. Say, if they're making a request for a renovation or something like that, they have to get approval from the Corporate Board; and if there's no funds available, they look at who has the first priority, depending on the condition of the building or whatever they're asking for for renovation. So it's more or less who's got the first priority; that's how they look at it. A lot of time there's a lot of disagreements. I think it makes it more difficult for us to run our school properly because we're being told what to do from other school schools. We're being told we can't spend that kind of money for what we want to spend. Say, we wanted to improve our library or something, the Corporate Board has the final approval, so it's frustrating at times when you think that the need is there to them it's not. They look at other communities who are making a request of renovation; that's how they look at it.

In commenting on the pitfalls inherent in this procedure, one board member identified the variables of 'community context,' uniqueness of need, and the quality of the L.S.B.C. representation as possible forces affecting the prioritisation of divisional needs. Further, it was claimed that the prioritisation procedure may disadvantage some communities:

All the communities are different anyway, and if they send one or two representatives, unless they're very powerful people, to that Corporate Board, the voice is not heard, and usually they are requesting something that is unique for Fort Chip rather than something that can be implemented across the school division-community board. . . . That's what's hurting. We want to go ahead, but sometimes we find that we're being held down because of money factors, because we can't get what we want, because if we get it, twenty-five other communities will want it, and the money isn't there to do that. But still, why should we be held back because some others are not ready to advance further?

Although it was felt by some interviewees that "the Local School Board Committees which have strong leaders to represent them at Corporate Board meetings probably get the best deals for their communities," it was suggested by one respondent that "seeing a need" by visiting a community often assisted Corporate Board members to understand needs of communities:

You can get the message of why . . . across in different ways, . . . why you think your school is a priority. . . . There are many kinds of sob stories. You can tell them reasons why they should look at our needs. Or . . . one of the ways we tried was, we had our Corporate Board meeting here, and we wanted to let the other board members see that we were

telling the truth about what we were trying to get funding for, and now they see it with their own eyes, and maybe next time if a request comes up they'll know that we have good reasons to apply for this request.

According to one respondent, approval of a L.S.B.C. recommendation at the Corporate Board level sometimes creates other problems, as expressed in this comment:

If we get something, then other ones jump in and say, "Well, if that school can get that, this school can get it and this school can get it," and I think that's some of the things that the bands right here now are feeling unfair, because they put a lot of their money into the school for tuition because of all the status people here, and still some of our money is going to other schools because they're saying it's cost shared; and they feel that if they're putting it into this school, they want it to be spent at this school.

### **Change Initiatives**

The Athabasca Delta L.S.B.C. recognises the opportunity and responsibility to contribute to policy development through a motion of recommendation to the Corporate Board, and this encourages initiative at the community level. The opinion of one board member was that "the Corporate Board governance would be a good structure if there were some changes made, if there was more control locally over staffing matters."

I'm trying to make changes at the corporate level where individual communities would advertise, hire, and everything else. I mean, if I was looking for a job and I went to Peace River and expected to teach in Peace River, and they sent me to Timbuktu somewhere, you're not going to get a hundred percent of my efforts. It's there; it's deflated right there; we've lost from day one; we've failed from day one. But if you were to have, as I say, X amount of teachers in Fort Chip, we'll get the people that want to move to this community, not the people that are bounced all over the northern country. That's one change, actually, I'd like to see at that level. The Corporate could stay alive, and a lot of communities would stay with them if they would be willing to make some changes.

Other changes initiated by Athabasca Delta L.S.B.C. to assist governance practices of the Corporate Board secured benefits in terms of wider representation for all communities:

The Corporate Board was set up so that the chairman of the Local School Board Committee would go to the corporate meeting, . . . and of course we're so far away and sometimes our chairman couldn't go, so we had no representation at the board [meeting], . . . but you couldn't send another local school board member in his place because he wasn't on the Corporate Board, . . . and it happened in other communities. . . . It was hard to get a quorum, so our local board passed a motion that because we were all elected, why couldn't an alternate be sent to the Corporate Board meeting with full voting powers for that one meeting? They accepted that, so that's why now if the chairman doesn't go, he or she can send an alternate in his place, and that really helps the business proceed, that the Corporate Board is pretty well always assured of a quorum. . . . That was one of the first big steps that we accomplished, and I think that affected everybody in the whole division.

The other change discussed by a number of board members was aligned to the concept of greater autonomy at the local community level for all L.S.B.C.s. Two respondents commented on the progress and some challenges in this area:

- I think currently they [the Corporate Board] are looking at a little bit more local control and responsibility, and certainly in the realm of budgeting. I think it's easier for the community to say some of the things that we need in our school and when we can recognise it probably before the Corporate Board level would recognise it, so I would like to see some closer working relationship there where there is a little bit more decentralisation and maybe use our Area Offices more, because they're closer to where the action is, you might say. And if we had a concern or we passed a motion to do a certain action, I suppose, well, maybe the area officer could say yes, you know, and make the decision without it all going back to the superintendent or to the Corporate School Board. I think it's moving that way. I think there's more local autonomy all the time.
- I think at the last Corporate Board meeting there was a lot of talk about other schools also going in for community control, and that's positive. I spoke to other board members of other communities that talked about it, and it only makes sense. I think the talk about community control was in the works for a long time. It's just that I don't think there was too much enthusiasm and determination in community leaders. They wanted it, but they wanted it to fall in place instead of working, and I think now that the community leaders and people are saying, "Well, let's do it."

It was the opinion of two participants that the Northland School Division administration was encouraging an increased level of input by L.S.B.C.s. This was recognised as a significant change in attitude.

- Well, at the last Corporate Board meeting they had here, people from Northland School Division were saying how they would like the boards to take on more control, and slowly give the local boards more control, is what they were talking about. But we've been trying to get that for a couple of years now already.
- Well, they're now giving more input. They were trying to give the local members more input and more final-decision level, more into the communities, and they're willing to bend and help out. I find now that to take control they will help through their human resources, whatever resources they may have, and help out when any community wants to go in that direction. That's changing. The attitude of the Corporate Board is changing.

At the same time it was noted by one board member that the composition of the Corporate Board was changing:

It really is, and the makeup of the present board is quite different from the one prior to the elections too last October. But it is rather interesting to see how they get through that tremendous amount of business. Sometimes you get bogged down with little discussions that go around and around the bush and you don't get anywhere, but basically I think they do very well.

It was suggested by one interviewee that the emergent multicultural composition of the Corporate Board may have a significant effect upon future policy development, implementation, and directional priorities of the division. This was considered by one participant in this study to be a positive trend:

I think it's good too, because you see the problems that others have and I think you become more tolerant of what others have, and I think we go home and appreciate what we have, many times. Sometimes it puts our problems in perspective; they don't look as bad as we thought they were. I think we're fortunate [in Fort Chipewyan] because we're looking at a different type of problem. It's more to do with curriculum and the courses offered, whereas some of the other schools will spend half a day and talk about where they're going to build their fence or something like this, you know, that to me is almost peripheral to the whole educational question.

## Understandings and Experiences of Athabasca Delta

### L.S.B.C. Organisation and Practice

In undertaking the task of L.S.B.C. representation with a commitment to improve education in the Fort Chipewyan community, members of the Athabasca L.S.B.C. cited a wide range of individual and collective priorities, initiatives, challenges, and aspirations. Several board members were appreciative of what was variously described as "strong leadership" of a 'productive board.' In the words of one respondent:

[The chairman], especially, takes the time to sit, and he'll go around to all the board members before he goes out to a Corporate meeting, and he'll say, "Anything you want to bring up? Any ideas? Any concerns? What have you heard?" He has that web open all the time, which is very good. And I really feel good about this board because we get along and we can laugh, and it's productive. That's what I feel about it: We're a productive board. I sit on other boards that are not as productive as this where we're gung-ho, . . . and [here] we all have different little tasks to do for the board to make it strong or to bind us closer. So it is good.

Further, the general consensus of board member opinion indicated that the L.S.B.C. organises itself well to conduct its business efficiently. The comment of one participant encapsulates the sentiment expressed by others:

I believe the board organises itself pretty well, . . . and I think most people in the community feel that they can approach the board if they do have a problem. We have monthly meetings usually . . . and forums, and the last while we've done pretty well.

### Priorities

**Education.** According to the comments of two interviewees, an important goal shared by the Athabasca Delta L.S.B.C. members is the commitment to the improvement of education services in Fort Chipewyan:

- We're stressing that education, like I say, education is a priority. In our own way and our own time everybody is out there to make sure that young people are encouraged to further their education. We bring in Syncrude, Suncor, all the big employers in Fort McMurray. They do not hire unless you have Grade Twelve, and we keep hammering that point to them. But the end result is up to them. I mean, we can't

force them to get an education; it's really up to them. I know, locally our goal is to try and get a larger group to graduate at the Grade Twelve level. We seem to lose our students after Grade Nine, Ten. This group here in Grade Nine last year is still up there. Whether we lose them in the next couple years or not, our job is trying to keep them in there.

- The whole thing with the school board is, we just have to work together with one goal in mind: better education by getting better teachers and better understanding of the community's ways, their demands. Whatever they have, we should be able to answer, be able to show to them the quality of education, what's being taught, what's practical. We should enforce, you know, cultural, maybe a week out in a survival camp. Bring an Elder in. You can teach science and still do it the traditional way and still learn the same things. I always go back to that, because I am a firm believer in that, that if kids don't know who they are, they'll never know. And until they find out, they'll be in limbo.

In unequivocally agreeing with the goal of education as a priority, one board member indicated a level of success in recent years:

To me [education] is the number-one priority that we have to have if we're going to succeed in the big world around us, if we want to say it that way. And I think Fort Chip has done very well because in '88 when we celebrated our bicentennial we did a countdown, and we had over a hundred students then who had completed their Grade Twelve. And yet you get all these comments that the educational system is no good; we've got too many dropouts, and nobody does anything. And sure, we've got dropouts, but we also have successes, but they never tell you about that when they quote these figures about what Northland is doing in Fort Chip. There's one student I can think of offhand that went through the system in Fort Chip; he's got a master's degree now. We've got other ones: One girl I know is a nurse; one's gone through and has a degree in social work; we've got several who've gone through and have got teaching degrees. So, you know, we've done very well, I think, for our students.

Conversely, it was the opinion of one trustee that current educational standards are not commensurate with those of the province, and this provided the following challenge:

[We] want to give [our] students the same type of education that every Albertan throughout Alberta receives. We're not getting that. I don't know why; maybe because of the isolation most of us have, and we can't attract and keep the qualified people that are out there. We know there's job shortages right now; the economy isn't there; teachers are not willing [to give up their positions]. They say we're keeping the teachers right now because of how the school is running, but I'm waiting for the economy to change and see what happens then. That'll give me a true story then.



Most respondents envisaged an important role for board members in assisting the promotion of parent/community awareness programs. In the words of one interviewee:

I think we can . . . [help community awareness] because a lot of the board members are leaders in different parts in the community, and we go back to our organisations and we push education and we stress it and we talk, talk, talk: "You've got to keep them in school, you've got to keep them in school." In my job I see a lot of people with my jobs every day. . . . We have Employment Outreach, intervention, child welfare. . . . We're always talking about education, and they're out there too trying to convince these families, "You should try and get them back in school. You should keep going to school. Get them up and kick them out of bed in the morning and get them to school," that kind of stuff, and we're really pushing: "You need to have Grade Twelve. You need to have more than Grade Twelve," getting the information out there. . . . I was just talking to somebody from Syncrude yesterday, and she said a lot of the big companies are expected to hire a percentage of the local native people, but these companies are saying, "We can't find any. We need to hire the native people with the qualifications. There is nobody out there with the qualifications," so we need to say to our people, "Go out there and get those qualifications." It'll take a while.

**Community liaison.** Other interviewees suggested that a priority was to liaise with the community, as was suggested in the following comment:

And it's also kind of a vehicle, I suppose, if other parents have concerns that they'll come to you with some of their problems. Sometimes you can give them direction as the best way to solve them, and it's kind of a nice feeling if you do help somebody and they're happy with the result. . . . I can give advice as to what maybe they should do, whether they should approach the principal first or whether they should approach the chairman of the school board or something like that. I think occasionally the chairman can deal with minor problems on his own, but at times it's a Big Board discussion, and sometimes it's in camera if it's of a personal nature. I think most times the board has come up with some working arrangement so that the different parties are pretty well satisfied with the outcome.

The priority for one board member was to represent the constituents by initiating and stimulating discussion and action:

This board has a lot of energy. There's a lot of communication. Whenever I go out someone is talking to me about education or social development, and it's good to exchange ideas and you know where everybody is coming from, so you're not just grasping for something to say at a meeting. You've heard it, and it came from somebody's heart, so you're just expressing the needs of these people who have faith in you to represent them.

According to one experienced member of the board, the community has entrusted the board members elected in 1992 with a mandate for community control of education:

The main function of this newly elected school board is to achieve community control; not band control, but community control. It's not possible to have band control because of the ethnic mix of the community. . . . All board members must be prepared to do the best for the community.

Although most board members indicated degrees of enthusiasm about this priority, an element of concern was evident in the comment of one participant:

Are they ready for it, or do they know what they want? Do they know where they're going? It scares me. I don't know how that's going to work. It remains to be seen, I guess, but I don't think they're ready, myself. But they think they are. They [the treaty Indians] have some good leaders; I'm not saying they're not [good leaders]. They have some good leaders, but there's over a thousand Crees here.

As stated by one board member who claimed that he was acutely aware of the challenges and the uniqueness of the approach to local control of an education system but remained strongly committed to this goal:

Oh, we realise that we're probably one of the first in Alberta that I know of—we're probably the only ones in Alberta the way we are: four different factions within one community off the reserve. Other bands have their own reserves, their own jurisdictions; they have more control. We have to work together to achieve our goals. I mean, all our goals are the same, as I said earlier. If we split up and try and work our own separate ways, it'll never, never, never work; it never worked in the past. We have to stick together. Everything we've achieved here, we've done it together: the roads, the water-treatment plant, the winter road south, all the pavings, all the power, we brought it here. The lodge is a community-owned thing. This is a band-owned office. It's got to be a joint effort or we've lost it. We live here; we're going to be buried here; we have to develop it. We can't expect somebody else to do it for us. If we keep doing it we'll still be waiting and waiting and waiting. We have to develop it ourselves, and we have to do it collectively. So we have differences, but we celebrate differences amongst ourselves.

In pledging full commitment to the priority of community control, a number of board members recognised the challenges involved. One participant articulated this commitment:

I want to stay on the school board until this is all in place, and I'm going to work hard at it, at seeing it done. Getting there is going to be a lot of hard work, but once we accomplish it, once we reach our goal, it'll be like our tourism. Well, we've been bragging about all this, and now we've got to go out and prove it. I think once we get to that stage where we're going community control, we have proven that we can do it, and we'll prove it by hiring the best, and the network of people working together will hold the fort together, more or less, and overlook everything with talking, negotiations. So we have a real struggle on our hands, but it's a nice struggle because we're all thinking of the same thing down the road: We can look after ourselves and should be given that chance, at least. Because if we don't, we're not going forward.

In an increasingly interdependent world, the pursuant isolation factor associated with community control concerned one local school board trustee:

I don't think some people know what it [community control] means! I would dislike it very much if we broke away from Northland, because Northland is broadening their horizons, and they're introducing a lot of topics of native background, native interest to the students. I think last winter they signed an agreement with Grant MacEwan, and I think the University of Alberta was involved, whereby they were starting to offer teacher-training courses, so that would mean that some of our natives could receive the training right in the community. And if we were to break away, we would lose all types of contacts like that, and as one little separate school board, we wouldn't have the finances available to proceed with something like that.

### **Initiatives**

**Community control.** According to the priorities expressed by a number of respondents, a commitment to community control of education dominates the organisational initiatives of the L.S.B.C. In fact, according to one participant, the time span for the realisation of this initiative was envisaged as "Well, we're looking at the life of this board, so that this is another three years, and then we believe we will have community control because that is our major mandate." As explained by one board member, recently the Athabasca Delta L.S.B.C. "presented a recommendation to the superintendent" which emphasised the financial viability of the initiative of community control:

With the cutbacks and the recession, it is cheaper if we operated our own [system] right here instead of the travel that Peace River goes through, and Northland has to bring all the members into the Corporate Board meetings, plus honoraria; it must be incredible. That money could be steered to stay with the community if we had community control, if we had that. And the time lapse of decisions, it goes from month to month because of wherever the meeting is. Well, [with local control, when] something important comes up we can have it right now, get the board members and do it right now, because we don't have to answer to someone in Peace River.

I think once it's a community-owned school we'll have more say, and I think we'll be able to have better control of our school.

Although the respondent indicated community support to proceed with this initiative, a hint of insecurity was also noted:

And we have the support of all the factions of the community, as I said earlier, to do it. Whether that'll stay there, you know . . . .

On the other hand, at least one board member envisaged a collaborative approach to the pursuit of this initiative:

It means the involvement of the school board, and not only the school board, but the community. The community's got to develop it; it would not be only the school board.

However, it was interesting to note that the realisation of community control for some board members suggested ownership by one segment of the community:

- More input by the community, more pride I know will be shown by the community; it's theirs. More involvement; that would open the door more for the community members, especially the native, knowing that it's theirs, they have some control what goes on in there.
- The people that are really pushing it right now is the Education Authority, Indian Education Authority. They've always been pushing it. Yes. And they are the majority here; they are the majority here. They're representative of both bands. There's four people appointed by both: four from the Athabasca-Chipewyan band and four from the Cree band, and they formed that Indian Education Authority. It's a federal—they get federal funds, and they represent the bands, just the bands too, and not the rest of the community members.

The notion of control by native people was expanded in the following statement made by another board member: "Alberta curriculum won't stay the same. We will probably introduce more native programming. Any changes that we made would be

made by the community, at the request of the community, I feel, anyway. We'll recommend changes." It was suggested by the respondent that when community control occurs, the Education Authority would "dissolve, because they would have thrown their support behind the community control, and I could see that dissolve, and all the resources and finances would be transferred to a school board or authority."

Although the structure of the new education board authority would need to be determined, one respondent provided some possible guidelines:

The community [education] board, however they're selected . . . has to either take full control financially and all the responsibilities with it, or nothing. . . . The structure of the board will be very different. . . . Well, I see it being elected; it's got to be elected. If it's appointed then you've lost control. Chiefs and Councils will be directing which way to vote and which way not to vote. People must go in there open minded and make decisions for what's good for the general public.

**Training.** Some board members noted that the initiative of assuming community control would necessitate current board members' preparation and training; and, according to one interviewee, some consideration has been given to this requirement: "We'll probably get Northland to try to get upgrading of the board. Some [members] are new; some have never been involved before. Those people will have to get introduced to the do's and don'ts of how things are run." This will be managed by

probably getting a workshop together, getting a facilitator who's been in this education field for a long, long time; bring him in; get an outsider who doesn't have any ties with the community or the Corporate Board level, I would think. Somebody neutral. There's people out there that can do this—native, nonnative, it doesn't matter. I don't try to put a color barrier on anybody. We're there to represent everybody, and everybody here is—it doesn't matter to me, and I don't think it matters to anybody in *that* board. If he or she is qualified to do the job, we have no problem with it.

**Infrastructure.** Apart from the preparation of local school board members, one participant explained that the board would require assistance with the development of an infrastructure for the new education system:

But first we have to get our whole plan together and then slowly develop how hiring policies and benefits packages would work. . . . There's native teachers out there whom we need to attract. . . . I personally have been trying to get people in here, but they've established roots elsewhere, so they're married off and now they've called other places home. Some are willing to come back. That control we do not have yet, like hiring. They're screened by Northland. . . . And we know a lot of teachers are out there that are willing to come back, that were happy here and the community were happy with, but for some reason left. I've spoken to a few of them, and they didn't like the Northland system, for some reason. They all had different reasons, but Northland was the major one. And we seem to be training constantly; all of Northland seems to be training. We're getting students right out of university. They get the training here and move away after two or three years, and we're always in that cycle, constantly training, constantly training young people. We have to get away from that. Our students are affected by it because they do not know the people; they're always strangers, not used to them, and of course the students are going to test them to the hilt, every new person here, what they can get away with. So we're always in that cycle. If we can get away from that cycle, I think in the long run we can attract teachers here to stay here for at least five, ten years, then we have a better system.

However, it was stressed that the board would be assisted with the development of administrative structures for the community education system: "It'll have to be done by somebody else that probably would have the experience in doing it in different areas of the education field."

**Increased involvement in staffing.** In the meantime the L.S.B.C. is agitating for increased involvement in administrative procedures aligned to the recruitment of teachers for the school community. The current level of involvement by the L.S.B.C. was explained by a number of respondents:

- We interview the people they screen. They probably get people into the list, and they get screened for the qualifications and everything else, and then we in turn will do the final interviews and select from that point on. But we're not involved from day one, . . . but it's not as much as we'd like.
- We have more say in hiring our teachers now. We even get to interview them, where in the past we didn't. . . . Maybe the recommendations we make are approved more often than they used to be. So, yes, that's a change. In the past it seemed like any recommendation we made was just turned down, but more things are being approved now. But Northland also knows that even if they disapprove it, we'll go back and argue it and push harder, so we're pushing harder. Maybe that's what we're doing.

- We've had the other, but now, if we want good education, we must do it ourselves. We must select our staff; we must recruit ourselves; we must come to terms with the problems, and we must provide equal treatment for all children. We must establish community networks instead of the very fragmented approach to government that we've had in the past.

**Community involvement in the school program.** Other initiatives instigated by this L.S.B.C. include the involvement of local organisations in the school program.

We try to get everybody within the community to help out in their own way, with health issues introduced in the school, like sex education, AIDS awareness, stuff like that. We stress *education* always, and we get that organisation to put the programs together and introduce it into the school at no cost to the school, and the bands support in any way, the Metis locals support any way they can. We have to work together to try and achieve that; everybody's got to be working for the same goal.

**Discipline policy.** As documented elsewhere in this report, the L.S.B.C., in consultation with the school, addressed identified needs associated with changes to school discipline procedures.

Slowly we're making changes with the discipline of our students. . . . We've formed a discipline committee because discipline is a big concern for parents, and they want more control [over this] in the school. But the laws do not allow us to do certain things; we have to watch how we discipline our students. . . . It puts everybody in a difficult position,

One board member felt strongly about this issue, particularly in comparing current procedures with his own experience as a student:

You know, you were sent down to the principal's office, and guaranteed you were going to get a strap. I don't think they took advantage of that. I don't think they were abusing the children. I think they were doing a lot of good to the children in regards to discipline, and they went from one extreme to another to protect the child, and I think they're overdoing in areas where I think they need that strict disciplinary—well, it's [suspension's] not a punishment; I guess it's more or less for them to be able to know that what they're doing is wrong, and sometimes you're going to have to use physical punishment to get your point across. But right now you can't even touch a child; you can go to court or get charged for so much as touching a child, so they went from one extreme to another to protect the child, and I think they did more damage than good.

Further, the action taken on the issue of school discipline by the L.S.B.C. responded directly to concerns expressed by parents:

It was a community effort. A lot of parents were upset because they wanted their children to be able to stay in school, and there's a lot of distraction from other children, the ones that don't want to be in school. They know that if they create enough problems without being punished, physically punished, that they'll have a four-day holiday. So a lot of parents were upset because of the students that were distracting the others, so they wanted to try to set a policy that would have more clout, I guess it is, that would be able to control the children without bringing back the strap.

In response to community demand, the L.S.B.C.

foresaw that [a policy] had to be in place as soon as possible because the school was getting out of hand, and it was something that they had a lot of meetings on and the board said, "We've got to go ahead, got to go ahead now and set up meetings with the community" just to let them know that they're aware of [the process], and then the changes were made, drafted up, and approved by the community, also by the school board.

Currently, implementation of the new policy is being monitored with some degree of caution, as expressed in the following sentiments:

- Some say it's working; some say it's not really doing anything. We just made those changes, so we're going to have to give it another probably a year before we can say whether it's working or not. There's always room for more changes, and if the ideas that have been put to use don't work, then we can look at other options.
- It's still new; we'll have to give it a chance. The students are aware of it. There's obviously got to be some changes made in the policy. We'll be reviewing it at the end of the year, and then any changes that we think should be made will be made, that the committee think.

However, expectations of outcomes in the longer term were positively stated by one interviewee: "I think it'll be more effective because then I know the disciplinary policy will change to suit this community. We can't use another community's policy to suit our needs, because we're different."

**Hiring of a counsellor.** Following the development and implementation of the discipline policy, the L.S.B.C. hired a counsellor in 1992, and the long-expressed need for a counsellor was satisfied. The following comments convey the reactions of two board members to the realisation of this objective:



- We got a counsellor, and we've been trying for that for about four or five years. We've been saying, "We need a counsellor in the community, we need a counsellor, we need a counsellor," so now we have a counsellor. So I think *that* was an accomplishment.
- One of the biggest concerns we had was for a counselling position in the school, and we finally got that last year, so the community was quite tickled over that, so that was a major accomplishment.

The process adopted by the L.S.B.C. in hiring a counsellor for the school was described by one board member with some excitement:

So the school board made the decision to hire [a counsellor] . . . because the tuition agreement said "money for one counsellor." It had never been used. So the school board stepped in and made the decision to hire [a counsellor]. We ran the ads, and then Stephen, who has been coming in for over a year, was just a natural [person for the job]. . . . And that's the good thing about a local school board: When you have something that desperate that needs to be focused on right now, well, it didn't have to wait a month for the Corporate Board; we made it happen, instead of, I think, before, Northland— the superintendent or whoever—just more or less ran the show.

### Challenges

Community control. According to a number of respondents, the L.S.B.C. was elected in 1992 on a platform of mandated change to community control of education. However, it appears that most board members have recognised a multiplicity of challenges inherent in this objective:

Right now the main challenge is getting all the factions together and trying to get control of the community in one way or another. Whether we take full control at this stage is something that's going to be answered in a few years, in a couple years. How are we going to elect the members? Are they going to be appointed? Are they going to be elected? We don't know that yet. We have to put a lot of policies in place before we will support it.

Other respondents suggested that segments of the community still had to be convinced that diversion to the path of community control was in the best interests of the total community, as conveyed in the following comments:

- But with this community control, I think the Metis people and the white people don't think that we can do it. That's my feeling. I don't know, that's just the way I feel. But for the bands and the Metis people, for

us to get this community control going will bring us together because we'll have input. It'll be this community's input on how the school is run, this community. The board representing those people will hire the teachers and make the policies. It'll be community togetherness, because it *will* be presented at board meetings and public meetings. I think if we do that [it will work]. But right now it's still in the planning stages. We know what we're up against.

- I think the talk of local control, a lot of people are undecided whether it's possible, whether it's feasible, or is it just another dream of this community to do it? Can we do it? There's a lot of talk about that. When I meet with some of the local people, they talk about that. You know, kids that I grew up with were wondering, can we do it? And I think the community also sees the local school board as the spokesperson, like, for all groups to come together. If a school board can relate that on behalf of the community, I think we've done our job. There are lots of roads backwards and a lot of bickering.

One respondent expressed some concern that *community* control would really translate into *band* control:

And I think it would fracture the community again, because I suppose the nontreaty students then would be paying tuition to the band-operated schools, and whether they would offer the courses that the other people would want . . . . And right now there's some comments that courses are being offered that are applicable to students of native heritage but not to the other students, and we'd have to consider all the students within the community, so it's the problem that, you know, sometime we're going to have to sit down and really think about it, which direction we should go and how we can offer the best to all.

The concept of increased community involvement in decision-making processes through the area office structures appealed to one local school board member who stated:

I like the authority to the area offices, coming right down to the local school board. I rather like that. I think in Alberta it is kind of a new idea still to have all this local participation in this larger body.

One of the major considerations in assuming community control for one board member was the question of facilities, as suggested in the following statement:

We also know that one of the things that we might have to think of is whether we use this school or build our own. It's in the wrong location, I think; it's not right. It should be out by where the school is, out by the Catholic church in that big field. I think that's an ideal place for a school. That's where it was. It burned in '81. So there's a lot of take it both ways, one way or the other. But like I always say, you can't go back and

say, "Well, this happened." All right, it happened, it happened; there's nothing you can do to change it. It's "What can we do? How can we better it and take it in that direction?"

The level of expertise required to administer an education system in an isolated community was a serious consideration for one board member. In his own words:

That's another problem too, because I think the community has to learn and grow too, [although] they've learned a lot in the last few years, mind you. But when you start getting into the realm of curriculum and, say, university courses being offered, we still have a long way to go. I think we have to depend on some outside expertise. It's not a decision to be taken lightly, because if we jump into it too fast, we're going to lose a lot that we may not have thought about right now.

The overall challenge to L.S.B.C. members, in the view of one respondent, was summarised in the following words:

I think we have to accept some responsibility but not jump into it so fast that we get in beyond our level of capability at the present time. I think it's a learning process for everybody. If we can take another step and accomplish it successfully, well, then we can take another one. To me it's something that's going to be phased in over a period of years; it's not going to happen overnight that we get everything that we want. But I would still like to see that framework whereby we do work within that larger organisation.

### Aspirations

Given the commitment to the challenge of community control articulated by a number of the L.S.B.C. members, it was interesting to listen to a diversity of individual aspirations articulated by the various respondents.

**Revival of cultural values.** For one participant, a revival of cultural priorities was important:

The involvement of Elders going in [to the school] and just speaking about anything that the kids want—how to make snowshoes, how to set a snare, what they did with the moosehide, and how did they look after their babies, because they all travelled by dogteam in those days—that's the kind of thing I want to see brought back into the school, because I believe, I really believe, and I push for the cultural side, if we bring those values back into them and get our kids involved in not only the cultural and tradition, but the best of both worlds, because there's no going back; you can't go back. And going back to the land is something that's slowly going to happen, but they're not going to be forced into it; you're going to

want to. . . . *Not* cutting ourselves off from the rest of the world, because we want the best of both worlds for the kids. I'd like to see that. I really believe that that's our strength, that's our backbone, if they know who *they* are and stand up proud and say, "I'm a Chipewyan. I'm a Dene, and I can prove to you that I'm just as good," *that* belief, because a lot of kids don't have any self-esteem here.

This aspiration of a revival of cultural values was reiterated by another board member, who stated: "I'd like to see a lot of culture put in [to the program]. There is some now, but I'd like to see a little bit more."

**Management of staffing.** As suggesting in the following comments, the stability, quality, selection, and orientation of staff appointed to the school community were challenges identified by some board members:

- We want to have an orientation with them. We want to attract teachers that will stay here for ten years or more. That long-term commitment is what we're looking for. There's a university in Saskatchewan—Regina. It's the Saskatchewan Indian Federation College, and they're turning out teachers that are in high demand because most are native people that want to teach in northern native communities, and that's a real plus for us. We had one teacher from there, and she was just fantastic. In fact, we had two. One is coming back, and the other one wants to come back.
- We want teachers that are willing to stay here, not just for experience. We've been getting teachers that are just straight out of university who applied to teach in a northern community with no orientation and whatnot. We get those, and they usually break down in January, February, when the days are really short and there's nothing to do because they've isolated themselves. Even now in the school, the teachers are still isolated, quite a few of them.
- We want the best person, that's our policy. We will hire a native; we'll give priority to natives *if* they're equally qualified, but the trick is to be equally qualified. If they have the qualifications and they're local, and they have the teaching certificates, they will get priority and be hired locally. But if they do not, they won't. We'll hire the best qualified.

**Graduates.** Central to the recognition of the pursuit of education as a high priority for this community, a number of respondents identified the expansion of senior high school classes and an increase in the number of graduates as important challenges for the school board to address. In determining to pursue this challenge, participants defined specific objectives associated with this challenge:

- I would like to see it [the school] still as one school under Northland, but with a little bit more local autonomy, and I would like to see the best courses offered that we can for a small student population, and certainly aim for the top; don't offer what I call Mickey Mouse courses, in quotes, that close the doors to university or trade schools or something like that. If we offer them the best, if they choose not to take advantage of it, that's their choice, but at least they had the opportunity to do so.
- We don't have very many in high school here; I couldn't tell you. Not many. Well, last year there was one graduate; this year there's one graduate; next year there probably won't be any graduates. . . . That's what I'd like to see: a whole great big graduating class. I'd be so proud of them.
- I'd like to see a whole sixteen, eighteen students graduate from Grade Twelve and have about fifty kids in high school instead of only two in Grade Ten and four in Grade Eleven, and to see kids stop dropping out and want to go to school. That's what I'd love to see.

**Career counsellor.** The challenge of hiring a career counsellor was also identified by one interviewee: "We want career counselling in the school, because we don't feel we as parents are capable of doing that kind of stuff." The urgency of this challenge was emphasised by a board member:

I'd also like to see a career counsellor in the school. We requested that many times through the board, too, and we still don't have one. . . . And there needs to be a lot of building self-esteem of the native students so they have confidence in themselves that "I can do this. I can become something." I think that's why a lot of kids drop out. They kind of look around and see, "Well, what should I try and finish school for? There's nothing there," and they just can't seem to see that there *is* something out there, and come on, get going, and they just need more encouragement, keep at it. . . . And then again, when I was in those grades, Grade Twelve was good enough, but we were able to see it as not being good enough any more; you need a lot more. Grade Twelve is just beginning. So they need to be encouraged, and I think self-esteem is very important.

Central to the Athabasca Delta L.S.B.C.'s definition of priorities, pursuit of initiatives, management of challenges, and realisation of aspirations is a recognition of the need for strong leadership across all sections of the community. One board member described it in the following way:

We've got to have strong leadership in the people that represent us, such as our chief, the Cree band, the chief of the Chipewyan band, the Metis local president, the ID board. We've got to have leaders that are willing—and we do have leaders that are willing to stand up for this

community and just take the bull by the horns and take it one step at a time, with everybody like a pyramid. You know, it goes up there or down here, and we're taking it one step at a time, but as a community, and we have a lot of struggles in between: not seeing things together or the right way or clearly or whatever. There's a lot of that, but still we're moving along. And I think it's leadership with a goal, a common goal, a mission statement of what we want, what we want to accomplish in a short-term or a long-term goal; and the long-term goal is just stages of short-term goals, and when we reach one, hey, pat each other on the back and say, "Well, this is our next." And from goal to goal it's the same process to go through on the preplanning, the planning, and going through it, and sitting down and communicating all the way up and saying, "Well, are we doing good so far? Compared to this, how good is this? Where are we? Are we within our goal target and datewise, whatever?" I don't think Fort Chip is going to go down; I think Fort Chip is going to be remembered or well known for taking matters locally and keeping it here instead of outside pressure. We have enough outside pressure, and that's brought us closer together.

### Summary

In the small, isolated, and culturally diverse community of Fort Chipewyan, seven trustees elected to the Athabasca L.S.B.C. in a competitive election process in 1992 are currently negotiating a range of challenges emanating from the influence of community-based and wider societal pressures. The history of this community is characterised by divisions in culture, governance, religion, and economic status; and the effects of this diversity continue to transcend the development of organisational life in 1993. It appears that treaty Indian people who were 'relocated' from reserves to access community-based essential services in the late 1960s had little opportunity for involvement in governmental processes until the mid 1980s. Although the 1983 Northland School Division Act facilitated community-elected board members, it was not until subsequent elections in 1989 and 1992 that treaty Indian people became increasingly interested in candidacy for election to the L.S.B.C. A new community school which accommodates Grades 1-12 enrolment opened in 1985 and continues to be a subject of contentious debate by segments of the community. A majority of the current, predominantly treaty Indian elected L.S.B.C. members believe that they were

elected on a community mandate to establish a community-based educational structure and to assume governance control of education. Although extensive efforts have been made by the predominantly treaty Indian members of the board to develop cohesive L.S.B.C. relationships, the goal of acquisition of the control of education within the 'life of this board' is not unequivocally shared by all members of the L.S.B.C., nor is there evidence that all segments of the community are 100% in support of this initiative.

This is a particularly interesting stage in the development of the Athabasca Delta L.S.B.C. trusteeship. At this point in time, the strong treaty Indian (Cree) leadership is challenged to mobilise community-based and external resources and to seize the opportunity for devolved authority to design and develop an educational governance system which will cater to multicultural client needs and priorities.

## Chapter VI

### Wabasca-Desmarais Community

#### Understandings and Experiences of Context

##### Geographical Location and Setting

About 60 or so miles as the Canada goose flies, northeast of the town of Slave Lake, are the two continuing foci, five or six miles apart, of a single dispersed Indian-Metis community which dates from about 1800. Whitewashed log cabins and, in summer, canvas tepees bordered the Desmarais-Wabasca trail. (Chalmers, 1985, p. 11)

The community of Wabasca-Desmarais is located approximately 400 kilometres north of Edmonton and is accessible by road via Slave Lake and via Athabasca and by chartered air flight. There is no public transport linking Wabasca-Desmarais to Slave Lake or Athabasca. Wabasca is located on the south end of North Wabasca Lake, and Desmarais is on the north end of South Wabasca Lake.

The following literary snapshot provided by a resident (Yellowknife, n.d.) proudly describes the features of the community:

There are 2 lakes joined by a river. The North Wabasca Lake flows onto the Wabasca River, the river joining the Peace River. There are 4 Reserves surrounding the Wabasca community, Reserves A, B, C, D. Our forests consist of balsam, spruce, jackpine, poplar, birch, willows. Wabasca is not a farming area except for vegetable gardens. There are many kinds of berries growing everywhere; they are preserved for winter and used by many people. Our sunsets are a most beautiful sight to see. The sandy beaches are known across Alberta. There are many good fishing spots on our lakes and rivers. Tourists are everywhere in the summer months. The road to Slave Lake is partly paved on each end; it should be finished within the next few years. . . . We have 2 Hudsons Bay Stores in Wabasca-Desmarais and 3 other small stores to serve the communities. There are 2 beautiful schools in Wabasca-Desmarais with 30 teachers teaching 665 students. Six garages are owned and operated by local people. We are proud of our communities of Wabasca-Desmarais. (n.p.)

As we drove towards the community on a mild winter morning in 1993, a guide explained that the community "is very scattered and is divided into two distinct ethnic groups of people." About one half of the total population of an approximate 4,000



residents live on the Bigstone reserves, and the other half of the population, largely nontreaty natives and nonnative people, live in Wabasca-Desmarais.

In approaching the northern shores of South Wabasca Lake, Desmarais, the older part of the community, which had a strong Catholic influence for many years, came into view. As reported by Yellowknee (n.d.), "The first priest's name was Father Desmarais. That is how Desmarais got its name" (n.p.). This picturesque historical part of the community borders the lake shore and features a number of older buildings such as the Catholic Church and the original one-room log school. The Band Office, the Education Authority, and the Bigstone Band kindergarten are situated at the edge of one reserve bordering this part of the community. More recently established buildings in this older part of the community include a modern hospital staffed by on-site certificated nursing personnel and visiting doctors, residences for the hospital staff, the R.C.M.P. headquarters, a community recreation centre, and a large, newly constructed Alberta Vocational College. Closely situated to the historical centre of the Desmarais community is the large, modern, well-equipped Mistassiniy School, which accommodates approximately 400 students in Grades 1-12 classes. A number of modern, compact buildings adjacent to the school were identified as teacherages utilised by staff attached to Mistassiniy School.

Continuing on this scenic tour for approximately eight kilometres along the lake, which was dotted with ice-fishing activities, we drove into the Wabasca community, which was originally an Anglican Metis community. According to one informant, a member of this community for many years, the name Wabasca is derived from a Cree word meaning 'white,' and there are two stories associated with the way Wabasca got its name.

One story is that when the early settlers came to the area it was windy, and the water on the lake was very rough; . . . *white* caps on the waves, so that it was called *Wabasca*.

The other story is that . . . it was in the fall, . . . and the whole area was *white*, . . . so it was called *Wabasca*.

Situated amidst an extremely picturesque land- and waterscape, some of the facilities noted in this part of the community included a large, well-stocked co-operative store which is a continuing reminder of the Hudson Bay trading presence, government offices, and an Elders' home. St. Theresa Elementary School, an attractive, recently refurbished physical plant which accommodates 150 elementary students, is located on a very scenic point overlooking the southern area of North Wabasca Lake. Nearby, the Anglican and Catholic churches, which featured so significantly in the development of this community, are located. Continuing along the road a short distance from St. Theresa School, the buildings noted included the teacherages available to St. Theresa staff and government offices.

Retracing our path from Wabasca to Desmarais, we travelled through one of the four reserves along a stretch of gravelled road approximately 10 miles to "another reserve right down by Pelican Lake." The houses on this reserve, demarking the entrance to this smaller part of the community, were scattered along the shores of Sandy Lake, which is located on the east end of South Wabasca Lake. The community was dotted with satellite dishes and tepees which, according to an informant, are used:

mostly for smoking meat and fish these days. This is part of the old wagon road that used to be in here from Wabasca. . . . When I first came here twenty years ago, this was a fly-in community; there was no road out here. . . . We came in the winter and kind of ambled along the lake here.

At that point the guide pointed out the location on the scenic shores of the lake "where the school used to sit before it burned down a while ago." A short distance from this location we caught a first glimpse of the new, large, modern complex—Pelican Mountain School, which accommodates approximately 50 children

resident in this community. In describing the establishment of this new school, a guide stated: "The community kicked in some bucks, and they got a full-size gymnasium which wasn't part of the plan. . . . From this point," it was explained, "the reserve communities of Wabasca-Desmarais are scattered out a long way, . . . probably about thirty miles from the north end, so it's quite a distance." As documented by Chalmers (1985), education services to this part of the Wabasca-Desmarais wider community were first established by the Mennonites. "Heading north to Sandy Lake, the east end of South Wabasca Lake, it [the Mennonite group] found a number of children without schooling. The Mennonites promptly persuaded the Department of Education to establish Pelican Mountain School District" (p. 20).

### Perspectives of History

Historical records (Bryan, 1969; cited in Ingram & McIntosh, 1980, 1981) indicated that the Lesser Slave Lake area was empty of human population prior to 1780 and that the vacuum was initially filled by Ojibway and Ottawa Indian trappers who were closely attached to the trading posts and eventually by the more independent Cree peoples. The Cree of the region north of Lesser Slave Lake advanced from Lac La Biche by way of Calling Lake between 1800 and 1850. At the same time a family of Beaver Indians moved from the Pouce Coupe region. The Crees gradually abandoned their attacks on their western neighbours and settled into the area permanently. The surname Beaver is prominent in the Wabasca-Desmarais community today and is a reminder of early history. The Cree language became the language of the area through intermarriage. It is suggested by some historians that many of the Metis north of Lesser Slave Lake sought refuge around this area following the Riel Rebellion. It is alleged that early trading began in the area—led by Peter Pond in about 1778. In 1899 the population in this area was about 200, and Treaty No. 8 was signed (1980, pp. 91-94; 1981, pp. 107-108). According to

Yellowknife (n.d.), "the missionaries from the Anglican and Catholic missions arrived about the same time as remembered by the Elders, . . . the turn of the century. . . . The first hospital was built by the Priests in the year of 1927. The hospital had 6 small 2 bedrooms, and one large room. The hospital still stands by the bridge. It is used as a store house" (n.p.).

The community has a long history of division emanating from community hostility and factions. Historically, a boundary separated the two communities. One long-time resident stated: "The two communities were completely separate. . . . There was an imaginary boundary. . . . There was a kind of feud." More recently, the 'boundary' has been eroded, and general movement and interaction between the cultures and identities are evident. According to one participant in the study, the "invisible barrier" is

falling . . . you all the time. It's always going to be there to some extent, and part of it is looking for the benefits that are the rights of the treaty people. They sign their treaties, and they have certain rights, whereas people that aren't party to it . . . don't. . . . For example, take the G.S.T., our wonderful tax. . . . So most of the points come down to the rights of the treaties. . . . They have the right to medical aid; they have the right to their education; they have the right to their tax breaks.

A more recently established resident of the area concurred with this observation:

I think [the boundary] is almost starting to lift. When I first moved here five years ago, it was very apparent. People would argue with you whether they lived in Wabasca or Desmarais, type of thing. Now it seems to be more of a Wabasca-Desmarais area, you know, slash-Desmarais, so we're like one. And I think it's since the hospital moved in. The hospital is Wabasca-Desmarais Hospital. It's not just Desmarais; it's not just Wabasca. . . . It's sitting on Desmarais land, but it's a Wabasca-Desmarais Hospital. And now we're trying to get a centralised post office, and things are happening. The community's not sitting back any more and letting the same people run it.

### Provision of Education Services

As noted previously in this report, educational services were first delivered in this community from a one-room log school house. According to the stories of the Elders recorded in *Memories: Wabasca-Desmarais* (Yellowknife, n.d.):

The first Catholic mission was a one-storey log house 1895-1901. Seven children were supervised by 2 sisters and 1 priest. Then a log house was built by the local native people sometime between 1900-1905. The first years were hard. The school children helped with the work. . . . St. Martin's mission was 3 stories high. On the top floor was the dorms for all. On the second floor were two classrooms. . . . Speaking for myself, and I'm sure many others, I was never mistreated. Many of the Sisters travelled for weeks or months to get here. They taught us respect for ourselves and others, how to sew, knit, and other skills. (n.p.)

It appears that early education services were provided mainly for treaty children. An excerpt from Yellowknife taken from the *Mission Chronicles*, dating back to 1895, stated: "Around this time (early 1900s) a certain agent promised the priest that the treaty children would be looked after by 'Indian Affairs.' For each child the mission would receive \$75.00 per year per child" (n.p.).

Although St. John's Anglican Church and Mission was established in 1894 at Wabasca (as told by the Elders), many of the Metis children were raised by both missions, and some attended the convent from the earliest times. However, the Metis children privileged to education were in the minority. Yellowknife (n.d.) pointed out that

From 1930 the Priests were concerned that the Metis were not getting any education so St. Theresa School was built in 1938. A few of the children had been in St. Martin's School when St. Theresa's opened to about 15-20 students. . . . St. Theresa School expanded with the increase of attendance. Some of the students from St. John's even transferred to this school. A hot lunch was served to all students even though the number of students was growing pretty fast. The school was extended to 3 classrooms by 1949. . . . In those days the school inspector was feared. He came once a year. He was the one that gave the approval for students to go on to another grade. (n.p.)

The new St. John's Mission was opened March 8/50. The building is now used by different government agencies. (n.p.)

Little information relevant to the history of this community was uncovered by the researcher for the period between the 1930s and the 1950s. However, Chalmers (1985) wrote:

During the 1950s, three schools served the area. At Wabasca there was an Anglican residential Indian school which operated two classrooms for about 45 youngsters; it also accepted a few Metis day pupils. Nearby was the Roman Catholic St. Theresa School, staffed by two middle-aged nuns with no professional qualifications other than long experience in mission schools. Their pupils were all Roman Catholic Metis children. The Desmarais Indian Residential School, Roman Catholic, housed and educated about 140 Indian children who were distributed among five classrooms. Thus, in the whole community, there were 240 to 250 pupils in nine classrooms. Most were in Grades I to VI, a small number in Grade VII, and the remaining ten or dozen in Grade VIII. (p. 11)

One local school board member recalled his early experiences of education at that time in the following words:

I went to school in a convent . . . back in 1949. . . . I never saw the bad things they say about—but it was harsh discipline. Harsh discipline was introduced to us: the strap and . . . aler, but a lot of times you ask for what you get. It's not like every time you speak you got hit, but when you did wrong, you got what you got coming, I guess. But I entered the convent in 1949, and I was about seven years old then. . . .

The first thing they did to me was—well, I didn't speak one word of English, and it was hard for me to understand anybody; they spoke both English and French, I guess; more French than English—and they cut my hair; that was the first thing. They cut my hair, and I was not supposed to speak my native language any more from then on. So it was hard for me; it was hard for everyone. . . . There was little English spoken, only around the nuns, and whenever they were far away we spoke our Cree there. . . . Yes, they taught us English, and them, too, they couldn't speak fluent English. A lot of French in there, broken, broken, and broken language, French mixed with English. That's why a lot of people that came out of there could hardly speak for themselves. But a lot of people maintained their Cree language, because we didn't use the English language. They wanted us to, but it's different when you're facing a native person, and a person that you know, to speak English to him. . . . Today we use both [languages] in our place. All my kids speak Cree. The younger ones, . . . not much, but they understand it. . . . My older boy speaks fluent English and Cree.

According to Chalmers (1985), towards the end of the 1950s the Alberta Minister of Education established Wabasca School District. This authority rented St. Theresa School building, opened another room in the same structure, and added a portable unit for a fourth classroom. The expanded educational facility

accommodated non-Catholic as well as Roman Catholic Metis children. A further development about this time was the construction of a junior high school at Desmarais to serve the whole community. "The new school was named Mistassiniy, the Cree word meaning Bigstone, the name of an early chief and leader of the Wabasca Cree Band" (p. 11). However, some 15 years after the establishment of this school it was completely destroyed by fire (1979), reportedly at the hands of disgruntled students.

As reported by Chalmers (1985), following the establishment of Northland School Division in 1960, the division assumed control of the Anglican School at Wabasca and the education of the Roman Catholic children at Desmarais who were accommodated in the new Mistassiniy School. At about this time the former St. John's was closed, even as a residence, because a new Northland bus service made it redundant. The residential dormitory at Desmarais remained under Roman Catholic control and continued to serve a wide geographical area which extended to the Peace River and far to the north (p. 11). It was closed in 1973 and converted into a community centre by the Bigstone Band. When in November 1979 fire destroyed a major part of Mistassiniy School, the community centre had to be pressed back into service again as a school (Ingram & McIntosh, 1981, p. 109).

As the churches had established and carried the torch of influence on native education in this area for many years, alleged "significant differences" emerged between the federal (Indian Affairs) and provincial (Northland) educational authorities and religious authorities. These differences were not resolved without difficulty as incremental changes occurred. Chalmers (1985) reported that the Anglican laity at Wabasca

objected to the naming of the Northland school St. Theresa. However, it was Northland's policy when it took over a school which had a name significant to those who were responsible for the founding of the institution that the Division kept that name out of respect for the local educational pioneers. The school continued to be named St. Theresa. (p. 12).

Further, the Anglican clergy and laity objected to the retention of unqualified mission personnel and what they considered to be an "excessive denominational atmosphere of the school" (p. 12). As it assumed the administration of schools in the wilderness areas, Northland Division adopted a policy which required the removal of all religious pictures and symbols with particular denominational significance; the schools were Christian, but not sectarian.

The integration of Indian schooling into the public system of Alberta continued in the 1960s, and within three years of Northland's

incursion into the Wabasca-Desmarais area, the three diverse schools had been welded into a single system embodying elementary schools at Wabasca and Desmarais and a junior high school at the latter point. Further, the number of operating classrooms had grown from a total of nine to 18. In place of ten or a dozen pupils in Grade VIII, they filled two classrooms. Instead of no students in Grade IX, there were about 25. (Chalmers, 1985, p. 12)

Notwithstanding the facilities available for education services at this time, administrative efforts were beleaguered by attendance problems. According to Ingram and McIntosh (1981), in the past most students dropped out of school at Grade 6, but in recent years more students are remaining in school until Grade 9. Very few students complete high school (p. 109).

From the early 1960s there was evidence of parental involvement in education. The minutes of a meeting at St. Theresa School on Wednesday, November 13, 1963 (cited in Yellowknife, n.d.) reported that "the Chairman . . . read an article from the School Act pertaining to the election of members to an advisory school board" (n.p.). The election process yielded a "Wabasca representative for two years," the "Desmarais representative for three years," and a "representative at large for one year" (n.p.).

As documented by Ingram and McIntosh (1980):

Reports from surveys, letters in the newspaper *Achimowan* (1964-69), and information from former workers in the community indicate serious rifts and hostilities between organizations, individuals, and the government.



The Gulf Report (1977:27-29) talked of a "three-way split" between Treaty people, a short-lived Chamber of Commerce, and the Metis. There were also indications of a split within the Metis Association, . . . while the three churches: Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Pentecostal, were described as currently not being a major factor in the life of the community. (pp. 97-98)

At this time the major problems identified in the community included unemployment and related government assistance/dependence, health-related problems, and limited co-ordination and co-operation in community-related activities. Despite the initiation and development of the Education North Project in late 1978 to "effect an improvement of the educational service through increased participation of the local community and its residents in various processes of education delivery" (Ingram & McIntosh, 1980, p. 28). the project was reported by Ingram and McIntosh (1981) to be abandoned due to a lack of cohesive community support:

The analysis presented reaffirms the importance of community support and a strong, cohesive leadership team if Education North is to succeed at the local community level. In Wabasca-Desmarais the potential for strong community support was diminished by historical factors, bad luck (the Mistassiniy arson incident), and local politics (the Bigstone Band-Department of Indian Affairs-Northland School Division triangle). (p. 118)

In considering the winds of change affecting this community throughout the years, one respondent, partly educated in this community and now a member of the school board, stated:

There was an Indian Affairs Department that used to control every aspect of an Indian's life, everything, and we were basically just like children and Indian Affairs was our mother and our father. And in the last fifteen, twenty years there's been some power transferred to Indians . . . to take care of themselves in certain areas although our hands are still tied in lots of areas. But there's been a positive step forward.

To another participant in this study, the change was multidimensional. The perception of one other recently elected trustee was:

Oh, everything has changed. In my time when I was growing up, I went out [of the community] for a few years and came back. I've noticed a lot of change in the way the community is structured and the way it's planned, and I was part of the planning, myself, in the later years. There weren't that many houses here along this road, and for sure there was no

school here where it's at today. There were just a couple of houses here right on this spot. Probably between five hundred and a thousand, maybe, people lived here when I went to school. But scattered, just like today even . . . in five reserves. I think the latest reserve was established in 1937; that's the last one. . . . They call them A, B, C, and D just for identification purposes.

One respondent described his understanding of the current provision of local government services in the following way:

Today they call this whole area a hamlet—Wabasca, Desmarais. They call it the hamlet of Wabasca-Desmarais. Technically, it's not. It doesn't have the governance that a hamlet does. . . . It would have a reeve, maybe a couple of council members, and they would have more responsibility for their own maintenance programs. . . . That's provincial. And ours is, well, we're part of the improvement district, which is a basic boundary set up by one provincial government, and we have a council that makes recommendations to the improvement district. But to be a real, live, full-fledged hamlet, it's not that. . . . It's called it, . . . but it's not that.

The community has been dependent on the "outside world" for services for many years, as indicated in the following comments:

A lot of times we depend on—like, for instance, we've been under the thumb of Slave Lake for services. It's just lately now that services have operated in Wabasca: social services, housing for the Metis and nontreaty people. They were operated from Slave Lake, and still are. But some things are not; some things like the ID [Improvement District] Council provide to the community from the ID office here. . . . Unemployment is about eighty percent. . . . People have to go out to find out, unless they want to stick around here and do nothing. There's very little to do here, unless there is something industrial started. We have many resources, but they're all going out there. Timber—we've got lots of timber around here. We see it go by and that's it. The oil activity in the wintertime, there is quite a bit, but it all goes out. There's no services here. The heavy oil just north of here is hauled to Slave Lake and pumped into the pipeline and out of here.

The following perspective of the current provision of educational and other services to residents of Wabasca-Desmarais was shared by one respondent:

Today about half of our school population are treaty, but only thirty percent of them live on reserve. So for tax purposes, only thirty percent are treaty; the rest are residents . . . because of the tax structure and the way it is. . . . You don't have to live on the reserve if you're treaty. There are a number of treaty people that own land off the reserve and live off the reserve. They cannot lose their treaty rights. But since they own land off the reserve, they pay taxes, and that's where the funding comes from the provincial portion. . . . So it is possible to be treaty, live off the

reserve, and be counted as a resident, which we consider as basically nontreaty for tax-dollar purposes. It's not taking away any treaty rights. . . . Medically, they have the right to medical facilities the same as they would . . . if they lived on reserve. If you're living on the reserve, the band has a tuition agreement with Northland, and that's where their funding for education comes from.

Within the community we've got five or six bands represented. . . . We've got a couple of students from the Arctic Red River; we've got some from down in the Bloods, the Sarcees, down in southern Alberta; and one from Onion Lake now in Saskatchewan. . . . They just kind of move around.

Families of school-age children make a decision about where they want their children to attend school. There is no zoning within the community, so parents of children attending elementary school have the option of enrolment at Mistassiniy (Grades 1-12) or St. Theresa (Grades 1-6). The implications of this parental choice of school during Grades 1-6 was explained by one participant:

There are children who live in the Wabasca area of the community and attend Mistassiniy School, and there are children who live near Desmarais and attend St. Theresa School. . . . It can be anything from the school where the family first enrolled, they moved to another area, . . . or parental preference.

The high school programs and facilities at Mistassiniy School accommodate graduates to high school from St. Theresa and from Pelican Mountain School.

At the time that this study was conducted, three elected L.S.B.C.s independently serve the respective school communities of Pelican Mountain, Wabasca, and Desmarais. The Pelican Mountain school community is significantly isolated from the main body of the community, and it was reported by one respondent that there is little interaction with the Wabasca and Mistassiniy L.S.B.C.s. The latter L.S.B.C.s represent schools located within a distance of eight kilometres. According to board members representing each of the L.S.B.C.s, there is little formal interaction between the two committees apart from extraordinary sessions at least once a year to discuss common concerns, a get-together for a picnic twice a year; however, there is informal interaction all the time. As explained by one interviewee, "The unfortunate thing

about that is, I think, we meet on the same days and not necessarily the same time, so who wants to sit through six hours of meetings or whatever?"

An important area of formal interaction between the L.S.B.C.s in this community is at the Corporate Board level. The observation of one interviewee was that

the chairman of each Local School Board Committee in this community is a Corporate Board member, and some of the same concerns will hit the table for both of them [Wabasca and Mistassiniy], and they talk back and forth. But each board has no legal clout, if you will, with the other boards.

**School boundaries.** Historically, as reported by one interviewee, there used to be a boundary between Wabasca and Desmarais for the two schools. This meant that candidacy for a particular board was restricted to those persons living in the particular section of the community. One parent/local school board member claimed that this arrangement denied her a voice in her children's education:

They would say, "If you want a voice . . . just come to a board meeting." But then they would say, "Well, you don't live in Desmarais, so you don't have a voice." . . . After Grade Six the kids have no choice but to go to Mistassiniy, and I wanted a say in my kids' future, and so did other parents. . . . If you were not a resident of Desmarais—and there's a line somewhere; I don't know whether it's the airport, or some people say the Burger Baron is the dividing line between Wabasca and Desmarais—if you didn't live in Desmarais you could not run [for election] on the Mistassiniy School Board, and I always got frustrated, because my kids go there. . . .

At that time the board was dominant native, dominant treaty. . . . We had one nonnative on our board. They did what they could, but they lobbied for a lot of years to have it opened up to both communities. . . . And it happened. . . . It took a lot of years, though, a lot of years.

The following comments from a number of interviewees indicate that the opening of the boundaries in this community was considered to be a long-term gain by a number of board members:

- Just this last year we got that boundary raised so that now anybody from the two areas who is a resident of the community . . . over the age of eighteen and interested in the community can run on either board or vote on either board, but they can't run on both or vote on both because that would be a direct conflict of parliamentary procedures.

- Parents and board members, school board members, [lobbied], because it took lobbying at Northland; it took lobbying to the government; it took all kinds of stuff. There had to be a special bill written or something, I don't know what it was, but they finally opened it up. It was a good move, because the people that ran for the positions, it's the most they've ever had, run for a school board, and you could see that the people wanted a change. They were ready for a change, and they got it. And that too is a step of the community becoming one.
- There's a lot of ideas out there [in the community], and if you get a varied structure of people, like you get from all walks of life, whether they have kids or not, you get a lot of ideas from these people generated constantly at every meeting, and that's what we want.

### Understandings and Experiences of the Mistassiniy

#### L.S.B.C. Election in 1992

According to two respondents, the personal decision to stand as a candidate for election to the L.S.B.C. is guided by well-defined procedures which enable a clear understanding of the electoral process, according to one respondent:

- You have to have so many people to nominate you, so you go around and ask somebody to nominate you. If there's somebody that nobody likes, well, you'd have a hard time to get nominated because nobody'd want to put their name on it.
- In actual fact, we have to come in, and we get nomination forms, and we have to be nominated by—what is it?—five people who reside in the community. Those [names] all have to be listed on our nomination form, and from there there's a certain amount of time that we have up until an election, and we actually campaign and so forth for that position, and then the entire community gets to vote on who is going to be elected. Each school board has a different number of members on it, depending on the size of the school and so forth. This one here has a seven-member board. Once we're elected, then from there we go through regular channels. We elect a chairman of that board and a secretary-treasurer and a vice-chairman. The [executive of the L.S.B.C.] are all elected by those seven people.

### **A 'Hotly Contested' Election**

In 1992 elections for the L.S.B.C.s in this community were significantly influenced by the demise of the 'boundary' which had long separated parent involvement in the two community schools, St. Theresa (Wabasca) and Mistassiniy (Desmarais). Some outcomes of this change were noted by one respondent:

It was an interesting election. We have not had that kind of turnout before.

But the other dynamic that came into play is, your predecessors petitioned the provincial government to open the boundaries, and this was the first election in our community where it covered the whole community. Now, to compound that whole process, St. Theresa's board got in by acclamation, so the whole community could vote for our board, whereas if they had had an election too, people had to make a decision which board to vote for. So there were some interesting dynamics this time. . . . About half of [the candidates] had a platform, . . . had posters up with a statement on them and some pictures, and the other half didn't. There were twelve people running for the seven positions.

To observers who were not involved in this process, "it got fairly hot and heavy. . . . There were quite a lot of them running. You still see some of the posters up."

### **Candidacy Motivated by Desire to Be Part of the Educational Process**

Although board members who were interviewed spoke freely about their personal reasons for involvement in the L.S.B.C., the common theme was aligned to a personal desire to be "part of the process" which would help their children's education. This theme is encapsulated in the comments of three elected board members:

- . I've always been involved in a school with my kids, and I guess I just wanted to get involved on a higher level. . . . I've been around the school a lot, and it's just something I decided a long time ago. My parents weren't involved in the school at all, and I swore that if ever I had kids, boy, I'd be there for them.
- . But I really truly believe, and that's why I'm involved here, is because I've basically thought that as an individual, but as a group as well, that we could make a positive change. I still believe that.

- I think one of the primary reasons why I decided to get involved is, once my children got into school, then I wanted to be a part of the process where, I know it's difficult for our children these days to get the education and to get ahead, and one of the reasons, like I said, was because my interests lie in having them get a better education and be successful, and that was probably one of the primary reasons. Other reasons, of course, I know a lot of the kids in this area; I know their families, and I know that probably they have the same difficulties that other native children might have in northern Alberta.
- Yes, I wanted to try it out. I've been with various other organisations.

Most board members interviewed provided a number of civic-centred reasons for becoming school trustees. However, one board member suggested that some elected board members may not be so altruistically motivated:

I know in some cases you can see where some of the people are coming from, where education is not their priority; it's just getting on the board. And, I don't know, maybe they're power seekers, or it could be because of other personal reasons. . . . You can pretty well tell where they're coming from. Even at the Corporate Board level you can tell where their interests are. . . . They'll give you all kinds of reasons of why they're there: They're there for the children. . . . [But] where you have such a diverse community as, say, Northland, you're going to find those types of people no matter where you go; when you've got that many involved, it's going to happen. You've just got to hope that you have a lot of other good people.

A further reason for involvement in the L.S.B.C. for one respondent emanated from a specific concern about educational priorities—and the determination to work to make a difference, to improve education:

That's why, like me, I don't have the education like the other board members. They have their own things, I'm sure, why they got on the board, and I have my own ideas, and culture is one. You have to know who you are in order to do good in anything that you do. . . . See, kids have to know who they are and be proud of what they are. There is not enough culture awareness in the school. I know it starts at home, but I don't know *if* it is starting at home. That's why we have the dropout rate. . . . I want to try more and more to eliminate the rate of dropouts.

### **Multiperspectives of Community Expectations of Board Members**

I often ask myself, "Why did people vote me in?" because I have no experience at this, but I've always been involved in the school, so maybe people just see me involved in the school and, knowing that I take an interest in the school and what's going on, maybe that was a good plus for me, I don't know.

This perspective of one trustee was supported in principle by another elected board member who speculated on the proposition that the community supported people who demonstrated responsible leadership: "The thing is, when you're elected, the community is going to consider your responsibility. I mean you don't get elected because of who you are; I think they know [that]." However, this was challenged by one respondent who compared the outcome of the election process in a different local organisation:

Well, but sometimes you do [get elected because of who you are]. Look at our own I.D. there. It just scares me to think that nobody even tried to defeat those people that are in there that haven't done a good job. They just let them take over again.

In discussion between board members during a group-interview session, it was argued by some participants that the problem in this instance stemmed from "who was willing to step in?" Apparently, the organisation referred to in the previous quotation lacked community involvement and was unchallenged during the election process. This, according to one respondent, indicated that "the community is obviously happy with what they're doing." According to one respondent, this did not appear to be the case with the election process for the L.S.B.C., which "got all the community support and all the people [candidates] eager to get in there and fix things."

However, in reflecting on the outcomes of the election process, one respondent suggested that reputation in the community "does [count] a lot." This assertion was echoed by another participant in the study, who stated:

So some people who didn't campaign got elected on their reputation and the carryover value, like Jimmy. People knew who he was; they knew his track record; they knew him in the community. Others were defeated for the same reason. No doubt in my mind, I don't know if one of the new



board members may have simply got elected because he is the seventh person [and] because they don't want somebody else on it, so that may have happened.

Other board members speculated on reasons which prompted the community to vote for some candidates and not for other candidates:

- So it's these people who are really interested in the education of their kids; normally, it's people who have kids in the system and so forth anyway, and these are the people that go out, and they actually run a campaign and so forth, just like you would anywhere else, to get elected. This is an elected position.
- It's whoever wants to run and for whatever reason they want to run on the board. Then the people go to the polls and say, "Well, I'd like this," and [who knows] whether they base their judgements on the way the person is or their education or their stand in the community or whatever, or because they don't have anybody else that they can choose.
- The community wants to see the highest standard of education possible for the kids while still keeping the older traditions and so forth in mind so that they don't lose that. But they also have to have that education in order to get anywhere. No matter what you do nowadays, you have to have that education, and their goal is to strive for the best education they can get; that's all there is to it.

In what was described as a 'hotly contested' Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. election process, it was argued by a number of Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. members that the community voted for candidates in accordance with well-considered community priorities. Further, it was claimed by one board member that the community is increasingly aware of the performance of leaders in the community and supports those candidates whom they believe can effectively represent them:

But the sense that I get in this community now is that people are starting to wake up in terms of who they put into positions, even though there are still some mistakes being made and they have regrets about who they put in. I say this because there's so much that happens in this community that we're powerless to do anything about.

It appears that this challenge of ensuring that a voice is democratically heard in this community may be generalised across the levels of other community organisations and therefore influences election processes. The opinion of one respondent was:

I think you have to be very careful of who gets elected to the board. It's the same as a community, though. You've got to be careful who you elect on your community councils and things too, and people are going to have to get more serious about it and do more study about it and work. And we're going to have to work and be very open with Bigstone Band. We're going to have to work to get that there, because it's okay for me to say that I'm willing to work with you, but the community's got to do that too; the community has got to become more involved all over the place [community] and not just worry about Bigstone Band.

One reason why community members voted for particular candidates was seen by at least three board members to be associated with perceived personal power:

- Yes, they think we have power as individuals.
- And, you know, we don't have any more power than a parent, as an individual.
- People do [think we have power]. I get phone calls all the time, and people think I can just fire a teacher. Well, I can't do that. I'm only one of seven of us, and then we're only one of twenty-five boards, and things don't happen like that.

According to one board member, the perception aligned to "personal power" of board members may be related to a lack of understanding by the community of board member role responsibility. This argument was further considered by another board member, who speculated:

Yes, I don't know if they [the parents] quite understand the authority, the responsibility of the local school board. . . . There may be exceptions. There are perceptions out there that the local school board are the ones that have the power to do anything at the school. There are exceptions like that, but in general I think you find that most parents are kind of unsure, uncertain about where local school boards' powers and authorities are.

In contemplating his own experience prior to election as a board member, one participant agreed that the community may not really understand the function of the L.S.B.C.: "I don't think they know for sure, because I know, until I got involved, I wasn't really sure what they did, either."

Notwithstanding the assumption that the community may be unsure of the powers invested in the L.S.B.C., a number of members were adamant that the community perceived their elected representatives as the key to increased decision

making at the community level. The following excerpts reflect the feelings expressed by a number of board members on this issue:

- I think this community is sick and tired and fed up with being looked at and being controlled and decisions being made out there and them not being made here.
- If you were to survey the community and say to them, "Would you want the decisions to be made by the local school board or here locally rather than at Peace River by the Corporate School Board? Who would you want to make your decisions for you as to the school and its future?" I'm sure the answer would be "Locally, here" because of their bad experiences; and, like I said, they're powerless.

Overall, the perceptions of most of the members elected to the Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. concerning community expectations and aspirations were related to a long-felt need for 'change' in the community which would improve education standards.

This is reflected in the following observation of one interviewee:

So, having said that, I think people are more picky, selective as to who they pick to sit on committees because they want change. There's still going to be the bad ones, bad apples, but I think more and more they're starting to wake up. It's not because I'm related to him or her and that type of stuff. That still happens, but on the whole I think it's starting to change.

As succinctly stated by one respondent, "They want better schooling, better control of everything. . . . I'm sure a lot of people are thinking that way."

### **Quest for Ethnic Acceptance and Cultural Understanding**

In view of the continuing presence of a number of different ethnic groups in this community and the records of community division and incohesion across the historical landscape, what are the challenges pertinent to representation responsibilities for this community-elected L.S.B.C.? Clearly, the chairman of the newly elected board considered that the composition of the board is representative of the multicultural dimensions of the community:

It's a mixed board, and I think it says a lot for the community that it is a mixed board. . . . Yes, and they're all very good people. They're all into the community, period. The kids are kids in the community, and there

isn't a division between the band and the community; it's all one; we're all one. And when we interview teachers, we talk as one. It's not just "the native kids" and "the white kids"; it's not just "the band kids" and whatever. It's "We're all one."

Although Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. serves a predominantly native community, the composition of the newly elected board was described by one participant as "basically representative of half and half." A nonnative respondent indicated that she was

very proud to be sitting on that board as chairman, because if they didn't want me in there, they wouldn't have put me in there. . . . I feel I was elected by the majority of the community, native and nonnative, and I'm here for my duration, so we've got a pretty good board this time.

It was explained by the chairperson of the Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. that

[the community] could have very easily had a native person in there, a treaty native off the reserve, in that board. They've got four members there now; any one of them could have been their chairman, and yet it's almost like they allowed me to be there. I was voted in by the public, but still, they could have had anybody they wanted sitting there. So I feel very privileged that they allowed that. But I've always been involved in the school, and I think they know that, people know that, and they know that I will represent the community [democratically].

### **Individual and Collective Board Member Learning and Development Priorities**

But I'm finding it a real challenge. I'm really enjoying it, and I'm learning lots, meeting lots of people, seeing everything from a different perspective—the bureaucratic side.

This is how one board member described his first experience of L.S.B.C. trusteeship.

For many other respondents, the learning process was an ongoing and integral part of experience as a board member. The following stories elaborate on this concept:

- Being a new member to boards, to any type of board—I've never been on any type of board before—it's been a real learning experience for me, and I've got a lot more to learn.
- I think, too, that's why we have three-year runs, because I think the first year is going to be a learning process. . . . We're all fairly new to the board. . . . So it's a real learning process for us to learn how everything works and who has authority where and things, so it's going to be a learning process until we feel confident enough to stick our necks out and say, "We want to fix this" or something like that.

For one trustee, exposure to the wider governance environment was initially a challenging learning experience, as described in the following reflection:

I know when I went to the first Corporate Board, I had never been to the Corporate Board; I didn't even know it existed. It was a little scary, and I think it was more scary at my point of view because of the native population. I was coming in there thinking that it was going to be all native people; I was very surprised, but they're very warm, and I'm not just the only nonnative person there, and it was okay, but I was very scared, definitely scared. But you learn from experience, I think.

As suggested in the following interview excerpt, it was the opinion of one respondent that it is important for board-member learning and development to occur at the individual level if group cohesion and effectiveness are to develop:

So I think if the board and the school and the system are going to benefit in the long run, it has to start at the individual level as a school board trustee and working as a group, as a school board and so on, and it builds from there. . . . In some cases I think you find some people that are kind of impatient, the ones that have kind of been involved in organisations politically and administratively, that have that kind of background, that come into the local school board and realise that, well, there can be a lot of positive impact here once the local school board realises that, yes, they do have power. But when the realisation is not there by the group as a whole, then the board can do some things, move a few steps ahead, but in general it'll remain stagnant, the status quo.

A key aspect of individual learning and development for one board member was the acquisition of knowledge and understanding pertinent to the wider environment:

We have to be informed too, and one of the ways is through professional development, I suppose, is one way we can do it as local school board members. But not only as local school board members; also as parents. We have that right to know what's going on out there. This place here, that's not the world. I mean, there's a whole vast world and knowledge out there. So even as parents, we have that responsibility where we have to find out where we're going in education and also where our kids are going.

Achievement of the goals of group cohesion, purpose, and power for the L.S.B.C. depended, for one participant, on the motivation and the quality of individual board members in the organisation.

It does take personal initiative and commitment. If you're the type that likes to kind of coast along and is not committed, then you're not going to put as much time and effort into being an effective local school board member. But if you're the type that likes to try and create positive change

for the benefit of the kids at the school and the system as a whole, then you're going to make sure that you read up and that you learn, that you listen, that you try and find out what actual power and authorities that you have. And that can happen at the individual level, and of course there's other opportunities to learn.

Introspection was cited by one respondent as being an important personal consideration during the process of board members' learning from one another:

I've learned patience, because things don't happen in a hurry. You can't expect things to go overnight, change overnight, and I've really learned patience and cooperation. I tend to sometimes dictate a little bit, especially with my board members, when I don't think it's going the way it should be going, but I've learned to sit back and listen and encourage input.

This experience of learning and growth through involvement in organisational processes was shared by an interviewee who recognised the importance of a cohesive group approach to L.S.B.C. responsibilities:

I guess I get a bit impatient because I have expectations that some things can move a bit faster than others, but you have to appreciate that you have to work as a group, and you have to work with certain limitations—the administration, policies, etc.—and things can't get done overnight. . . . I've seen where you don't have to get radical, but you can make actual change working as a group, and there is room for doing that.

As explained by one respondent, this sort of learning experience was significantly enhanced by attendance at Corporate Board meetings:

We have a policy here that the chairman, when she goes to the Corporate Board meeting, they can take members with them as observers, and they go and they sit at the back, and if they want to, they can put their hand up and say something, but they can't vote. But they can learn from that. The first time I went there, I put on a suit and tie, and when I got there I was out of place because they went just the way they go to any meeting or something; they were just in their shirt sleeves and getting down to business. So after that I just went casually, but when I thought "Corporate Board," I thought, boy, these people are very important, so you've got to be dressed up. So I learned something from that after I'd been there. But we didn't have that policy when I first started for somebody else to go. Only the chairman went, so if somebody else sitting here wanted to be chairman, they didn't really know what they were getting into because they had never been to a Corporate Board meeting. So now, with the other members going, it's like a stepping stone: They can learn.

One board member spoke of his learning experience as a newly elected board member in the following way:

I never thought that the school system was this way; now I'm finding out, I find out now. There are so many things that you have to keep to yourself, that you cannot talk about.

Although most board members articulated the value of learning from on-the-job experience and interaction with other board members at both the community and the corporate levels, formal inservice mechanisms such as the orientation workshop also enhanced the learning/development process. One respondent described this program, which was attended by representatives of the L.S.B.C. in Area 3, in the following way:

The new board that was just elected here in November had a workshop in which they went through the roles and responsibilities of a board member, and that was put on by our Area Three [of the division], a representative from ASTA, Alberta School Trustees Association, and he just went through a number of scenarios and a couple of exercises as to what your responsibilities as a board member were.

Because local board members are elected for a three-year term of office, the membership is constantly changing so that there is a need for ongoing inservice programs to assist newly elected board members. Apart from knowledge gained from the formal components of the program, it was considered by board members to be a good opportunity to interact with other newly elected board members in Area 3 school communities. The perspective of one respondent who attended the orientation course set up by administration for new board members was that "it was very important that they set that up, because I had never been on a board before, so I didn't know what my role was."

The general consensus of opinion indicated that "Yes, we can learn a lot that way." However, while board members have access to a range of seminars and workshops, one interviewee pointed out that attendance levels and patterns depended on the L.S.B.C. budget priorities.

In considering basic criteria for the design of future community-based training programs for board members, one respondent identified the acquisition of the following management skills as prerequisites for effective board member performance:

I think some discussion and negotiation skills, some public-speaking things, because I find some board members have got very good points, but it's hard to get it out of them, or they'll ramble and ramble before they come to the point. You just want to say, "What's your point here?" type of thing. Some things like that, because public speaking is important for the job to get your ideas out. Negotiations, because you do all kinds of different types of negotiations. . . . Conflict management, how to deal with people, how to deal with public, things like that, people things, just how to deal with people, because I think the principals run the school. . . . They are responsible for how the school runs. We are the ones that tell them how to do it, and then they run it. So I don't think we need any type of, really, educational-type things. It's more management, how to deal with people, how to deal with budgets, how to deal with things like that. Budgets would be a big one, budgets and goals, planning goals and things like that, or how to stick to the goals or things like that. . . . And policy development, yes, yes, all that type of business stuff, yes, because we're more of the business end of it, I guess.

A primary objective, according to one board member, is to set up a workshop at the L.S.B.C. level to define organisational direction and goals:

We want to have a mission statement workshop, or . . . they call it a vision statement, for our own little board here. . . . The first time I sat at the Corporate Board, they have the agenda and they go through the agenda. Well, there were things that came up in that agenda that I knew nothing about, that meant nothing to me because I hadn't been on the board, I hadn't been hearing it all along. So when you come as a spectator once, you don't know what it's all about.

As succinctly stated by one respondent, board member learning and development occur in many different ways:

experiences, . . . workshops, . . . and seminars, just interacting in the school with the administration and attending Corporate Board [meetings] where you [share experiences]. I don't think you can take a course and learn how to be a board member; I don't think it's there. It's got to come from learning and experience.



## Understandings and Experiences of Local and Global Forces

### Affecting Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. Development

According to the understandings and experiences of participants in this study, the development of local school board trusteeship in this isolated, predominantly native community is both buffeted and challenged by community-based and interactive environmental influences external to the community.

### Levels of Political Activity

The views expressed by two local school board members indicated that political structures and governmental processes continue to challenge local leadership endeavours:

- Our hands are tied, and then you move up to the corporate level, and their hands are tied there by bureaucracy.
- It's delegated [through the provincial government legislation] that the Corporate School Board has some powers, but it's still limited, restricted to whatever the Alberta government decides to give to the Corporate School Board in terms of powers and authorities; and so therefore, at the local level, where we sit here, it's even that much restricted, limited, because the Corporate School Board still condenses or limits the authority powers that you have and so on. So it goes down that way.

However, a compounding level of influence for the current L.S.B.C. members is that of increasing political activity within the community:

You know, when Bigstone [the Cree band] first said they wanted a seat on the Corporate Board, we questioned them and argued with them: "Well, why? Because any public person can speak at a board meeting, so why do you want a seat at the board table?" They didn't want a voting right; all they wanted was to be able to sit up at the board table. Well, I don't see any problem in that, but why? What's the difference of them sitting there than back here? At first I was very put off, because I felt like they were unhappy with the [L.S.B.C.] representation. And when they sat down and explained it to us, it all seems like I can understand better where they're coming from and why they want it and why they feel the community needs it and we're not being properly represented. . . . It was like a slap in the face that they were saying these things. When I started to think about it, it's not that they're concerned about [our representation]; it's the whole picture.

A third level of political activity emanates from the cultural diversity itself, as described by one informant:

Oooh! Lots of that! That's something that is going to have to be worked on too; either worked on or ignored. There are a lot of influential families, influential people. [Local politics] . . . across the cultures, you betcha! They push the buttons, and they want to see a certain reaction. . . . You name it, phone calls from native people [to nonnative people] saying, "You have no business on our board. You don't even speak Cree," and this and that, and they're calling me names and everything. . . . They do have a lot of power in this community.

According to information provided by board members, this problem is managed by encouraging culturally aggressive members of the community to attend L.S.B.C. meetings and raise issues of concern.

### **The Challenge of Ethnic Understanding and Cultural Acceptance**

Although Northland School Division has been characterised as a native school jurisdiction and educational priorities have historically focused on the perceived needs of native students, demographic changes during the last decade have increased the dimension of cultural diversity. This is an influence which presents a considerable challenge to a L.S.B.C. which serves a school with 40% nontreaty enrolment:

We have a Cultural Committee in our school, and we are striving for cultural acceptance—not just the native acceptance, but the native accepting other cultures, like mixing a cultural awareness of other cultures. We're starting to bring in other things into the school besides the native stuff. And we're getting slack from Northland for it because it's supposed to be seventy-five percent native, any cultural thing you bring in, but then we try and tell them, "Look, our kids aren't. We've got forty percent nonnative children here that are tired of seeing the native dancers. Sure, they like them, they're interesting, but they're tired of it. My kids see them every year. Not just my kids, all the kids, and they're tired of it. Even the native kids are tired of it, so we're starting to bring in other things. . . . One of our Grade Twelve students phoned me one day and asked me, "How come we're having all this Cree shoved down our throats? Why can't we learn other cultures?" This is a native student; this is a member of the Bigstone Band, and he's saying to me, "Why is that all we're learning about? Why can't we learn about other things?" So at this mission statement at the Corporate Board, I told them about this young man, and I said, "He feels that, sure, his culture is important to him, and he values his cultures and takes pride in his culture," but he says, "I'm going out into a world that isn't native, totally native." He

says, "I have to get along in a world of multicultural, everybody. And I'm going out there feeling very isolated because all I know about is my native." So he thinks that we should incorporate more multicultural things into the school, learn about different cultures and different ways and compare it to the native ways so they feel like they can be native and they can go and it's okay because this guy's Ukrainian and his culture is important, and it's okay, so they can go out and feel more a part of society than being segregated. I thought it was interesting coming from a kid.

The response of a native-born local school board member educated in predominantly white society to the question related to the maintenance of a cultural focus in the school curriculum was:

If you're seen as a minority that's a visible one, you have a solid grounding; for that matter, any ethnic group has a solid grounding if they have retained their language, culture, their traditions, etc. Anybody has that opportunity, right? It's good to have that grounding, but you don't necessarily have to take slots away from a school system and make that the priority. It should be done at home or maybe the community or elsewhere. I think I had the opportunity of surviving in both worlds, native or nonnative; everyone has that opportunity. There's so many examples.

The sensitive issue of maintaining a balanced curriculum for a multicultural school in a predominantly native school jurisdiction was raised for discussion at a Corporate Board meeting, as explained in the following statement:

That was one thing I mentioned at the Corporate Board level, and I shook in my boots as I was saying it, because I felt sensitive about it. . . . I find myself cringing or not saying things because I'm scared of the backlash, I'm scared of being deemed a racist or whatever. Not that I'm saying something racial, but just because you bring up something like, "Well, how come we have to be seventy-five percent native cultural? Right? Why?" Well, you know, there's people right away, "Well, why not? It should be a hundred percent," and stuff like that. There are some that are very open to the mix, very open to the mix; there are others that are very closed to it. They are a native school, and that's all they want. And there's a few administration that are that too, that you have to fight tooth and nail any time you want to buck the system, and they're pushing native, native, native down your throat. And, fine, I truly respect it, I really do. But there comes a point when you can't; you've got these other kids here.

The reaction of the Corporate Board delegates was described by one respondent:

It was very quiet, not too much. There was a lot of mumbling and the murmur going on, but after the meeting I did get one lady from one of the other boards, and she's nonnative, she came over and she told me "Thank

you." She said, "Thank you for bringing that up, because I've wanted to for years, but there's so much political backlash and everything else going on there that it takes somebody new to bring it open, to bring it out." And I think they're aware of it, I think those people are aware of it. I wasn't saying it to knock their culture. I think it's great that they have their culture, but these kids have to go out into a world that is mixed, that is everything; it's a melting pot. And if all they know is their culture, if that's all they know, how are they going to fit out there? Really, how are they going to get along out there? It's fine to know your culture and be proud of it; that's fine, and I have no problem with that. But the kids have to go out into a world where there's other people, and they can't be selfish about culture. There's other cultures. So what we're trying to do is bring in other things. We want to bring in Ukrainian dancers, and we want to compare their costumes to the native costumes, because they're a lot the same, and then the kids will feel more comfortable with their costumes because they know it means the same thing as *theirs* does. So that sort of thing, and make them more comfortable in the world.

The increasing challenge of cultural diversity across the school communities in Northland School Division was again evident during the meetings held to develop a mission statement for the jurisdiction:

We had a mission statement meeting; we're trying to develop a mission statement for Northland, and we had a meeting a couple of weeks ago. . . . And when you learn why they don't like *mission statement*, why they don't like the word *mission statement*, it never dawned on me why they don't like it, and yet they tell you why they don't want that word in there. Okay, that's perfectly logical to me. . . . I can see why they don't like it, and they've been trampled for so—but it teaches me a lot more respect for them. . . . Being a nonnative, seeing it all from a different perspective, . . . I'm on the other side of the fence there. I'm the minority, we're the minority there, and I don't like being there. . . . Some of them are very closed to it, and you can pick them out, you can pick the racial ones out right away. You try and try and try, and it doesn't matter how much you try to show them that you respect it and that you care for the kids no matter what, you're still white.

The dilemma of the nonnative board member in a predominantly native school community was rationalised to a degree by the comments of one native informant who stated:

You have to think of the people at the local level and where they're at and try and understand their situation, because a lot of them will say, "Well, you've been out there. You're an apple now: You're red on the outside and white on the inside," type of thing. "You know what's happening out there," type of thing. And a lot of them are angry because of that, and I tell them, "Well, why don't *you* go? There's nothing stopping you."

However, it was suggested by one respondent that problems associated with the apparent barriers of cultural identity confronting the L.S.B.C. may be a universal challenge:

But then there's two sides to it too. The kids who are not native and living here. They have a hard time too. There's no culture for them. They're just plain Canadians, and that's all they are. They don't have a second language. Well, they know Cree, they may know a little French, . . . and it's really hard for them. . . . It takes a lot of encouragement from the parents regardless if you're Cree *or* white, and I think for parents and board members, I think the first thing they should be taught is that they're equal. . . . I think the first thing we have to do is to get the kids to be friends and get the parents to realise that there's no difference between native and nonnative people on this board. . . . We're all equal, and we've got to work together as a community and then work together in the school, because that's the biggest problem: There's too much of this "I'm treaty and I can get this" or "My mom and dad both work and I can get this." There's too much division in this community; that's the biggest problem.

While most board members recognised the importance of identifying cultural difference, it was generally considered that some values are shared between cultures.

One interviewee expressed it as follows:

I think everybody wants respect, whether it's from their children or from the world. Everybody wants the best they can for their kids. It doesn't matter what language you speak, you still want a roof over their heads and food on the table, type of thing, or the best education possible. I think discipline is the hardest one that we find real difficulty in. Because the native people have a whole different way of disciplining, that's the worst one. That's where there's the most split. It's very hard to discipline when they're not getting it at home or they're getting a different type of discipline at home, or they might not be getting any.

Although efforts continue to be made at the school-community level to alleviate multicultural tensions, one board member expressed the opinion that in view of demographic changes in some communities, the ethos motivating divisional educational priorities may need to be reviewed:

But the whole idea of Northland was for the native kids, and it's not so much like that any more. . . . There is a lot of mix happening, and, yes, the native children do have some learning problems and do have to be treated differently and do need some special teaching and stuff like that, that's right. But there's other kids there too . . . now. . . . It's been multicultural . . . for a while.

In considering the challenge of promoting multicultural educational priorities, an important responsibility for board members, in the opinion of one respondent, was the role of change agent:

Revise policies and so forth as the changes come in; mainly recommend change as much as possible. I think that's the number one thing, that we've always got to be on the lookout for what's happening out there and know where they're going to go and what they're going to need, and recommend changes to get them there, you know. We've got to see that. We've constantly got to be on our guard as to the changes outside the school.

### The Complexity and Range of Community Attitudes

A further factor which affects L.S.B.C. development is the complexity and range of community attitudes. For one board member, enthusiastic and cohesive collective community support would help make the difference to education that is needed:

I think if the community, the parents, if there was a community-wide movement, if there was interest by the community as a whole, and parents especially, to really care about what goes on in a school and to get involved, that would move the local school board, because a local school board basically operates at the desire of the people, the community. The people can create that to happen. If there's indifference and people don't care, the local school board can easily say, "Well, people don't care, parents don't care; we'll just kind of ride along and do as best as we can," but I think it can come mainly from the community, and I don't know, maybe I'm thinking idealistically, that would be the thing to happen, but it's not happening. I think the local school board can initiate that type of thing to happen through public meetings and so on, to try and get that movement happening. But that's where it has to come from. As a local school board I don't think we can initiate major changes if we don't have the backing of the community, the parents.

One board member observed a crippling degree of apathy at the broader community level: "If you had the community behind you it would be different, but when you've got a community like this where nobody wants to get involved, it's hard to get ahead." The reasons speculated upon by two interviewees for the lack of community involvement were, significantly, related to historical injustices and attitudes:

- A lot of the native families that are in the very rural spots or even around here, most of that older generation, like, the parents of some of these kids, grew up in the mission schools, were pulled away from their families, taken away, and now it scares them to think that their children are going away to school or have to go away to school or whatever, so they're trying to keep them here. I think we have to put out a message to those people. It's almost like we have to educate the parents of our kids that "It's okay, your kids will come back. They're not leaving you; they're going to be educated, and they will be back." It's not like they're being taken away from them any more, because a lot of them still feel that way. They feel like "You're educating my kids so they can leave me," more or less.
- A lot of them had very bad experiences, and if we were to have a mission statement on our covers, a lot of the parents that don't understand would think, "Well, it's the mission school; they're taking over again" or something, which is perfectly logical; I can understand that. There's a lot of older people out there that don't speak real good English, don't understand a lot of the new stuff, and it will be threatening to them. And that's something I find: They are very protective of their children. They don't want their children leaving the nest. If they want to stay home, they can stay home. That's another problem we have, is keeping the kids in the school, because the parents aren't strict with pushing them out. They feel that if they go out, they're never going to come back.

According to one respondent, the fear of many parents was that children would lose their identity and culture. However, this concept was not shared by one native respondent:

I don't think you can ever lose your culture, no matter where you go. That's how I see it, because I left home when I was sixteen, and I still, when I came back I don't know how many years after, I still remember my culture and I still remember my language. It's just something that you learn and just never forget, is your culture.

Many of the board members considered promotion of the value of education in the community as a high priority, but according to one respondent: "There's only a few of us that are making the effort of showing the kids that education is important, but it still has to come from the home; that's how I see it." However, as suggested by a board member in the following excerpt, there is a perception of increased awareness in this area:

I would say that . . . five years ago, some parents didn't think [education] was important, but today I think parents understand that it is important now. But some of them are realising that they can't get jobs unless they

have an education. But yet there's still these people that don't think it's important, because they only went to the elementary grades, because education wasn't pushed then.

Nonetheless, it was observed by the researcher that the importance of education is being reinforced within the school. A teacher composed the following citation for his Grade 5 students to write and think about:

Education is a lifelong task. It calls upon us not to avoid life's difficulties and dangers, but to meet them head on. Education makes us aware of the world around us. It helps us to understand ourselves and our place in the world. Education never ends. We are constantly living and adapting ourselves to fit into the world. Without an education, we will never learn about our world and our place in it.

The opinion expressed by one participant, however, was that the educational experiences of parents continue to influence patterns of parental behaviour in terms of their children's education:

And because their children were stolen away from [parents] before, a lot of the parents, that are parents now, were taken away from their families and weren't allowed to go home, and now there's no way they're going to push their kids out. They're going to keep them for as long as they can. And even when they get to be nineteen and they're still in Grade Nine, it's no big deal. That bothers me. You think, a nineteen-year-old still here in Grade Nine. And yet to them, what else is he going to do?

It was perceived by some interviewees that many parents do not actively promote education in the home, which often contributes to attendance problems. The core of the attendance problem, according to other board members, is associated with traditional native lifestyles; therefore, community re-education programs are needed:

- [It] would have to stem back to their parents and their grandparents and so forth: "We didn't go to school, and we're okay." . . . If the parents would push education, I don't think we'd have an attendance problem. But then if they don't, who are we to go and say, "Well, you'd better be at school and nowhere else"? We can't do that. . . . Sometimes you don't have the parents' support. The parents say, "Well, that's okay. My son or daughter, if they don't want to go to school, that's okay with me," type of thing. So then you're stuck again. . . . You're not getting any help out of some parents. . . . I think the role models are the parents, because, you see, a lot of these kids [who] are not at school, their parents are not telling them, "You have to go to school. You have to get an education."



- It's a slow process, like anything else. It may take another twenty years before a lot of these people are going to say, "Hey, yes, we want to get on the bandwagon. There's changes going on, and we don't want to be left behind." So it's just the thinking and the length of time it takes for those changes to take place.
- We're not just educating kids; we've got to also educate parents. Mm-hmm, and the community at large.

An important trend in this respect, according to one participant, is a renewed community interest in adult education, inspired to some degree, it was felt, by the construction of a new Alberta Vocational College. "This has resulted in a lot of adults going back to school." Further, the Bigstone Band is

sponsoring close to sixty students who are out in university or postsecondary institutes of some sort. We can't tell you exactly what they're taking or anything, but they're out there, and we have a plaque up there on the wall, as a matter of fact, where we started recording the different people who have got their degrees and so forth. . . . This initiative is supported by the work of a postsecondary counsellor, . . . and we'd like to see it continue to improve, because the jobs and everything that you have now, you have to have that education. And as board members, we kind of look at these kids and [hope it helps them].

The major frustration associated with the promotion of adult education in this community is the scarcity of employment in the area. This was explained by two interviewees in the following terms:

- We don't have the jobs yet. When we get the jobs in place, then we're going to see more of them coming back in here. They've got to have a place to work, or why come back? Why get an education if you're going to come back and just sit on the reserve? So we've got to create these positions and make sure—now if we get the school in, we'll have teaching positions and so forth. We've got to do that.
- Our return rate is very, very small, so we've got university students that are finishing off university, and they're not coming back; there's nothing to come back to, no job to come back to.

### **A Thrust for Change**

While school communities in Northland School Division have experienced major policy and structural changes during the last two decades, the current momentum for change is focused on an increased level of decision-making *power* at the community

level. Undoubtedly, the Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. is preoccupied with the prospects of imminent change. However, it is apparent that the perspectives of the school board members themselves is that the role of the L.S.B.C. is primarily that of facilitation rather than of initiation, as is evidenced in the following excerpts from the interviews:

- It would only happen if the people, not the local school board, because we as a group of six, seven people can holler and scream all we want and say, "In decentralising give more power to the local community." That's not going to do any good. It has to come from the people.
- If you had five or six school boards that want to go for this one thing, and then you had all these people in the public seats backing you, you feel like you've got more of a hand and you've got more justification to why you want this.
- There have been some changes in the structure, the way things used to be and the way things are right now. There have been some positive changes, although I personally think that they're kind of artificial on the surface and not enough. I think even though I've said that it takes the people collectively locally here as a group to create change, that's one option. The other is, politicians-leaders. In the last year or two years we've had the former Minister of Education state publicly that he wants the Corporate School Board to be decentralised. . . . The MLA out of Athabasca . . . and out of Slave Lake . . . have both supported decentralisation. Now, here we are given the opportunity on a silver platter by people that are making those decisions in the government, the Minister of Education, the former one, and two MLAs that represent this area, saying that, "Go ahead; support is there," and we're not moving on that. I guess that's part of my frustration, my impatience, is that the opportunity is there, because they see that there can be a lot of positive benefits coming out of that. Of course, I think the Alberta government has some advantages, too, in breaking up this Corporate School Board, but at the same time I think we here would have a lot of advantages with decentralising.

According to one interviewee, one advantage of a greater degree of decentralisation would be to overcome the isolation and diversity inherent in school communities attached to Northland School Division:

It would be nice if we could all be our own little areas, because we're spread right across the map from one border to the other, as far down as almost Edmonton, because we're spread right across the mountain. And why couldn't our little communities be incorporated into the existing ones that are there in that community? How come we have to have this separate system? . . . It's hard to say what's happening now. I know the local school boards are starting to pull, but it's hard to say what's going to happen.

However, in contemplating those first faltering steps towards greater autonomy at the community level, board members appeared to waver along a continuum between confidence and fearful intrepidation:

Well, just the fact that we've had a local school board for how many years . . . ? At least five, eight, ten years maybe? We've been practising how to be a local school board. We've made mistakes, but we've learned from them. But I think we've been practising enough, and maybe it's time to maybe play a real game. I really feel—it depends. They are a capable people in this community that have had experience in terms of being politically involved in organisations and in areas where they've experienced change being involved, and I feel positive that, yes, we are ready. But I personally, as a person, it has to be as a group, a local school board; it has to be the community as well.

It was important to one board member 'to get started' with the process of growth and development towards the path of autonomy:

If you never take that first plunge and say, "Okay, we're ready. We're going to take on the responsibility. We're going to fumble and flounder and trip and fall and everything like that, and we're going to make major mistakes," but so what? You've got to start somewhere, and I think the short-term pain is worth the gain in the long run. . . . Growing process. You have to make mistakes.

Nonetheless, one participant considered organisational growth and development to be a community-wide responsibility: "If the people elect the people that are not the best, then the people are going to have to wake up next time, and it's part of the growing process as an organisation or as a government." To another board member, the initiative of increased control over education in the community had longer term benefits in terms of community growth and progress:

The thing is, if you don't take that plunge, too, you're never going to grow; this community's going to sit right where it is. You take, for example, just the arena, just this AVC. How long did it take us to get those two buildings?

On the other hand, one board member speculated upon the awesome responsibility associated with L.S.B.C. independent governance:

See, and that scares me, giving up our so-called mother there, the Corporate Board. We might feel confident for this three years as a board that we can do this. What happens the next three years, the new board that gets in? What if they're not so strong as we are? Then what

happens? Then you're lost. You've always got to have somebody overseeing things. That's what worries me, especially with a new school board, because we are fairly new.

In the view of one trustee, 'autonomy' was not the issue, as suggested in the following comment:

Yes, but you're always going to be answering to somebody. You're always going to have to ask somebody, whether it's not the Corporate Board, and if you have control yourself, then you're going to be knocking on the government door, and it's going to be the same thing. You have just gone through a different route. Where we have the Corporate Board to fight for us at the government level, then you take them away and you're doing it yourself, you're still going to answer to somebody.

While other board members agreed that the L.S.B.C. may always be subjected to one level of bureaucracy, the perceptions of the benefits associated with independence from the Corporate Board were evident:

The positive thing about that, though, is that you've removed one level, which is Peace River corporate structure, and you negotiate or deal directly with those people that are in power, because that extra level is a bureaucracy that's hard to move. You know, in some instances the local school boards would love the way things are, because the Corporate School Board structure does things for them, because they're not ready at the local level to do it themselves, . . . the smaller ones. . . . Some are ready, yes, yes. It's just like a child that is ready to move out of the home, but the parent says, "Oh, you're not ready. You still have to have my control," and the kid rebels, so we have a conflict.

In debating this issue of readiness for an increased level of autonomy at the school-community level, the consensus of Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. members was encapsulated in the words of one board member: "I think not only this board, but this community is ready, but then you need someone [administration] to overlook it."

The form of administrative support envisaged was described by one respondent:

I do agree that we need some type of authority leading us, because I don't think we can go on our own, totally on our own. We're still going to need a division superintendent; we're still going to have to hire our own superintendent.

The objective of communities eventually running their own schools was, in the view of some respondents, an integral part of the Northland School Division organisational objective. In the words of one participant:

When we break away from Northland, that's what I can see happening everywhere eventually, because from what I understand, when Northland started it was a temporary setup. The whole idea was for the communities to run their schools, and that's just starting to happen now. There's been one school already broke away, and it's going to happen all over. I feel we're a big enough community that we could, we could handle it ourselves. We could handle ourselves with an administrative body there; you've got to have that, . . . somebody who knows the ropes.

At least one member of the Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. envisaged and articulated the possibility of an amalgamation of L.S.B.C.s in the broader Wabasca-Desmarais community:

There is one vote for Mistassiniy School, but Pelican Mountain, their one vote is for their school, but half their kids come here! It just doesn't seem right. I think these three areas here, which are very close, because the St. Theresa kids all come here after Grade Six, so they should have one board for those three schools, because it's all one anyway. . . . I can see the three schools—St. Theresa and this one and Pelican Mountain—I can see them merging and becoming one school board. . . . I can see us becoming one and maybe having two representatives on the seat, or something like that. I don't know, I really don't know. . . . Some kind of community organisation overlooking it or maybe a bigger board where you've got more of a choice of the community or something, maybe.

While clearly the thrust for an increased level of autonomy is one consideration for the Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. at this time, a recent announcement in the *Lakeside Leader* of March 9, 1993, titled "Bigstone Band Looks at Running Its Own Schools," could also be seen to challenge L.S.B.C. identity, allegiance, and direction. In this article Bigstone band Education Director Ray Peters stated:

If all goes as planned, Wabasca's Bigstone Indian band will open its first band-controlled school in September. It will probably be for Grades I and II, and be for children of band members only.

This might not sound very significant, but to band leaders, control of education is a vital component in the general move toward greater self-government, and economic development. And according to Bigstone Education Director, it's just the first step toward full band control of the education of its youth.

The Bigstone band currently pays tuition to Northlands to the tune of several million dollars a year. The thinking among band leaders is that the money would be better spent on a curriculum over which the band can exercise control.

What kind of control?

Well, offering more instruction in Cree, for one thing. And developing cultural programs with native culture in mind. All additional curricula would be in addition to Alberta Education standards, says Peters.

This announcement, apparently not unexpected, attracted mixed reactions from some respondents. The following comment indicates some confusion:

But now this band wants to have their own school. . . . But I guess they're looking into the future, because it can't happen right away if they want to take over their own school, and it says on there that there will be only treaty kids going to that school, but are they giving their people a choice? Because what if they want to go to Northland's school instead of the band school? Do they have a choice? They can't just say, "Well, go there and that's it." . . . I don't know what it really means by them trying to have their own school. Does it mean that they don't like what Northland is doing? There's questions that should be answered, I guess, before they go ahead. . . . I can't see why the band and Northland just don't work together and make it—because the band thinks that Northland is not doing a great job in some areas. If that's what they think, then they should just work together and try to make the difference between them. . . . And I think they're going to need other agencies; I don't think they can do it alone. . . . That's how I see it, . . . because I think we should work together instead of against each other. In a community this size, it's not big, and we've got to think of our children, because they're going to be our leaders when they get older, and if they see this, well, you know, the band is working this way and it's not working together, then . . . we say our children are our future, and if we can't work together, what are we showing them, really?

The opinion of another interviewee conveyed positive support for the initiative publicised by the Bigstone Band:

It's possible, anything is possible, because the Bigstone Band dish out a lot of money to Northland School Division. I don't know how much it is, but it's millions of dollars; maybe close to ten million a year. And if they took that money out and built themselves a school, then I don't know if Northland can survive any more. And I think Bigstone is going ahead, at least in bits; Grade One and Two, I think we should.

For one board member, band control of education offered the level of control solicited by elected board members: "And I can't blame them. You've got to try something else. If something is not working, you've got to try something else, something that you have control over. . . . You can make decisions on the spot."

The proposal to establish another school in the community also met with the support of one interviewee who stated:

And they are talking about starting a school, Grade One to Three, but it's a public school; it's a school for anybody; it's not just a native school. And that's fine, that's fine if they want to do that. It takes a little load off us. So there's a lot of things happening. It'll be an exciting couple of years.

While it was reported by some interviewees that there had been "little, if any" formal negotiation and/or liaison between Bigstone band and the L.S.B.C., one board member appeared unconcerned:

Well, actually, there's not much that the local boards can even do about it because it's on reserve, to begin with. But from speaking to them, . . . I see no problem. As a matter of fact, I see it as a great help to the area; like I say, reducing the number of kids in those other schools and supplying good facilities for them and mainly separating the high school, and I can see no problem with it. It think it's a really good move, because the standard of education [will be improved] by another facility.

The governance arrangements proposed for the new school are of particular interest to some local school board members, as the following comments convey:

- I think we have to be careful that we stress that it will be a community school, because if people think that it's going to be definitely just band run, if the band's going to have total control, there could be a lot of flak there from the nonnative community.
- Bigstone Band has made it very clear that they're not looking for a band-run school; that's not what they're after. They're not after a segregated native school; they don't want that. They want a community school like everybody else wants, a community-run school. Not a Bigstone Band-run school; a community-run school. And they're very, very adamant about that, because I've asked them that, because I worry about that. If they're trying to get a band-run school, that's segregating their kids, but that's not what they're after.

Notwithstanding that some band members are also members of the L.S.B.C., at least one board member expressed qualified confidence in the band's initiative to establish a school:

I can't see any flak coming from Bigstone Band unless they do want to get their foot in there more than they say. If they want to have both feet in that door instead of just one, that could be a problem. . . . It would be very divisive. . . . Oh, you betcha! But I don't think that's what they want. From talking with the Chief and things he says, it's time we've got to work together, because all the kids are involved, every one of them, and they're all equally as important as the rest, and as long as we respect the native cultures and things, then they will respect things that—I think it's a give-and-take situation.

### **A Micro School Division**

In what appears to be a collaborative approach to the pursuit of greater control over education at the community level, on May 27, 1993, the band convened a meeting of representatives of Bigstone band schools in the Northland School Division.

The purpose of the meeting was explained by a nonband board member:

We've been looking at becoming a smaller school division all by ourselves. There's seven schools that we want that are all under Bigstone Band tuition agreement. See, Bigstone Band feels that their moneys that they're putting in are not being spent adequately on their children, which is perfectly legitimate. I agree with that too, because all the money is just put into one big pot at Northland, and all the schools are treated equally; whereas if we had a smaller school division with just the seven Bigstone schools, with seven tuition schools, then we can have more control over where that money goes.

A combined community focus on supporting the students educated under the same tuition agreement was further explained:

The kids are all under the same tuition agreement; there's no other, other than Alberta Education. We'll be able to spend the money more wisely, look after our kids a lot more than worrying about *all* the kids in Northland, because when I go to the Corporate Board level, we deal with everything as Northland. Everything is just this big Northland, and the problems we have here at our school seem menial compared to some of the problems of the other schools, and yet you still have to deal with those other schools.

The understanding of one board member appeared to be that this step was a prerequisite to the establishment of a new school:

Bigstone band instigated [the meeting]; they approached us, and we agreed with them that something's got to happen, because otherwise, if we don't get together, we're going to split, and we don't want that, because they've said it's either we get a little more control, and the community too—like, really, they [the government] up your taxes, and then they cut the grants. Until we get a little more control—and if they don't get it, they're going to separate; they're going to start their own school.

The initiation of the plan to pursue the establishment of a micro division was seen by one board member as the beginning of a longer process, which would take time:



The meeting we're having tomorrow is the seven boards from the seven Bigstone schools, and, hopefully, most of them will be there. We plan on having some meetings just with the boards, and then we want to have some public meetings, but it all takes time.

This approach was extremely significant to one trustee because it provided an opportunity for long-term planning, which had not been a characteristic of L.S.B.C. operations previously.

We want to get some things started before we might be forced out. Before the other board comes in we want to get some concrete things started so that the continuity will be there, so that there'll be something to follow up on, because through the years it's just been cut off. The new board starts, and it's a whole new thing, a whole new ballgame. So we want something there for each board to follow, a longer term plan.

What are the implications for the Mistassiniy L.S.B.C., which serves a vibrant, multicultural school community, of the proposal to establish a micro school division comprised of Bigstone band schools? Some board members pondered the question and offered the following comments:

I can't see any hurdles from Northland, because Northland's been very encouraging. They've always talked about that, and if a group wants to break away, they'll do all they can to help you do it. I think it's mainly just the community, and if we can get the community behind us as a community, not as a white-native type thing, as a community, and this is a community-based thing, I think we'll be able to do it. I really think that's the only thing.

One respondent's comment conveyed a belief in the inevitability of a new band-controlled school:

Northland has been behind us on it. I've heard the superintendent say many times, he says, "Good luck. I hope you get your school into place and stuff like that." I've heard him say that many times. It will ease their problems with their portables and stuff, and they don't want elementary and high in the same building.

To one other school trustee, the question of expertise at the L.S.B.C. level was of paramount importance:

There's going to have to be some continuity, anyway. There's going to have to be some goals, some definite goals that we shoot for. And maybe, yes, maybe a little more education, a few more workshops and things to get some experience under our belts. . . . But I think if we can be open to suggestions and criticisms and things like that; and, definitely,

we're going to have a lot more responsibility. We're going to have to think a lot more before we agree to things; we're going to have to research things a lot more than we do. Be serious; we're going to have to be very serious about it. We're not going to be able to—like now, personally, I feel that some of our board members aren't taking it seriously; it's just something to do, type of thing.

Further, in the pursuit of greater autonomy at the local community level, a recognition of the need for experienced administrative support was articulated:

We're still going to have to have somebody that knows the Alberta laws and rules and the educational structure and things like that; we're still going to need that person; we're still going to need some type of administrative body. But with the seven we feel it would be smaller and more of a controllable group, . . . more of the same goals.

The expressed aspiration for a greater 'piece of decision-making action' at the L.S.B.C. level is haunted by local community and broader challenges. As succinctly concluded by one board member: "That's why I think it's important to have a good spokesperson, a good leader, and good rapport with the board and community at large."

### **Understandings and Experiences of the Corporate Board Structure**

The evolutionary development of governance functions for Northland School Division was characterised by learning and adaptation and minimal involvement in decision-making processes by communities. In the following excerpts, elected board members share their understandings of the outcomes of changes in Corporate Board functions during the last decade:

- I think it was 1960 Northland was born, and it's thirty-two years now, thirty-three—the structure at the time was really more central, a top-to-the-bottom approach where decision making was at the top and the impact, the results of those decisions were felt at the local level, and the people, the parents who felt those decisions didn't have any say or power to say anything. It's changed over the last five, ten years with this reorganisation where they have local school boards now and the Corporate School Board. There's some sense of decision making that has been kind of decentralised, but it hasn't been fully decentralised.

- Now, when they set up the local boards under the Northland School Act, that's just kind of the way they set it up, and not all the boards have the same number of members. It was a way in order to get individual input from each of the communities onto the Corporate Board, so they went from a six-member board that were basically political appointees to an official trustee during the transition stage to their twenty-four or twenty-five members that they have now.
- The chairman of each Local School Board Committee sits on the Corporate Board; individual chairmen are the legal representatives to the Corporate Board; and that person takes all of our interests from the local level to the Corporate Board level, and then the Corporate Board level makes policies and so forth to adhere to for the entire school division. And, of course, over there as well, at that Corporate Board level, from those twenty-six members sitting there, they elect a chairman and a vice-chairman and so on as well over there.

Theoretically, as explained by one respondent, "this is a democratic system in practice" because communities elect L.S.B.C.s to represent the community, and those same board members represent the community at the divisional level. One respondent considered that 'practice and growth' had enabled representatives from a diversity of school community L.S.B.C.s to achieve productive outcomes for the whole division:

Well, you know, when you get twenty-six people together it is growth, and they have to go through and say, "Hey, we're working as a division," and particularly in times of tough money. Now, there's some tough choices, and there has been a lot of growth and there has been a lot of discussion, and things have gone along quite nicely.

### **A Potential for Resourcing Inequity**

However, some elected trustees of the biggest school in Northland School Division noted an increasing awareness of the potential for resource inequity inherent in this governance structure. The following comments describe the nature of board member concerns:

- It is the biggest school in Northland, yes, and they look down on us for that because we soak a lot of money out, but we're the biggest one, so what do they expect? We're the only school with a full high school program, with industrial arts and home economics.

- It's a little bit difficult when you're a local school board that is probably the biggest in the division and you want to be a Samaritan to the little school boards that can operate with less, and you're the one that's a giant that can eat up a lot of the money because your needs are much higher and greater.
- The problem with the Corporate Board structure in this respect is that all the money is just put into the one big pot at Northland and all the schools' [needs] are treated equally. . . . A lot of the kids coming from the smaller communities come here to school because they have family in the area and because it's better than going to the city. And they [the Corporate Board] don't seem to compensate us for it. They pay us by the head, by the enrolment, but they don't realise that these kids are coming in from all over. . . . Some of them are in boarding homes. A lot of them have relatives here. Maybe their school only goes up to Grade Nine; in a lot of the littler communities they do, so then they'll come here for Grade Ten, Eleven, Twelve. We have no problem with the kids coming; we want to be able to offer them that. And it's better they come here than get shoved in a city school where they're, you know. But we feel we've got to be compensated somehow for that. We've only got one seat from this school on the Corporate Board, and yet we've got kids here from every jurisdiction, from . . . a lot of the schools. One seat, one vote, and that's exactly the same as Pelican Mountain. But half their kids come here. It just doesn't seem right.

As explained in the following comment, a further concern is the uniqueness of school communities in the Northland School Division:

We're unique here in that we have a multicultural school. A lot of our little communities are strictly native, and we have one that's mostly German. . . . They're mostly German there. . . . You are free to say what you want to say. They don't skip over and stifle anybody; they will listen to you, and you have an opportunity to speak your mind and say what you think.

According to one interviewee, this disparity between school communities represented at the Corporate Board table strains the complex funding arrangements for the schools in the division:

There are seven schools under Northland and under Bigstone Band tuition agreement. We *are* members of Northland, but we're seven board members, seven official trustees— chairmen—that go to the Corporate Board. There's seven of us compared to twenty-five at the whole board, so we can be knocked down on any decision we make. We seven might not agree with the way they're spending some money, but if the rest of the board agrees to it, then who cares? And because we are one of the larger schools—or the largest school in Northland, this one here [Mistassiniy]—and we draw a lot of the kids from other communities here, we're a big melting pot of a lot of the Northland schools, and we feel we're not being compensated enough for that.

Further, other board members lamented the fact that recommendations to the Corporate Board which had emanated from decision making at the L.S.B.C. level were not always approved by the Corporate Board: "We might agree to something here, and then it gets to the Corporate Board and it's kiboshed. They don't agree with it, and there's nothing you can do about it, which is something we're looking at."

Within the current parameters of governance, according to one respondent, it is disappointing when you put in a request for your needs to 25 local school board chairpersons with whom you have to compete in terms of resources:

When you do that you're automatically jumped on by the other twenty-three, and you have to justify why, and your argument has to be really strong in terms of why. So it's really hard. Even though we are a big school and our needs are quite great, we don't get what I think that we should be getting. . . . In some areas I feel that we're not being treated fairly, that our need is greater, and there's still some disparity in terms of the resources that are allocated to this school. I'm not being selfish here; I'm going by some of the information that I have in terms of figures and money that goes to different school boards. The problem when you go to a Corporate School Board is that there's twenty-five people [bargaining] for the same money.

### Management Strategies

In view of the disparity in terms of schools and resource levels in Northland School Division, what processes are adopted by this diverse group of people as they come to the Corporate Board table to make decisions that help every community represented? A number of interviewees shared their perceptions of the process adopted by the Corporate Board for managing the business of the division. One respondent observed:

The administrators go through and look at everything first, and they make their recommendations. . . . They make their recommendations and so forth, and if that Corporate Board don't like it, they've shot them down many times. I've watched them. So when that administration does something, they'd better have good reasoning behind what they're doing. They always do; they always check it out first and really work on it, because there are a lot of smart people on that board, very smart people.

. . . The chairperson sitting at that table basically approves everything in the end, and they've got a lot of people over there with a lot of ideas. And there's some of them there that if they don't understand something, it's repeated and repeated until it is understood. I think they've got quite a few very good people in that board. . . . There's definitely a dominance of native people, yes. Most of the smaller communities are basically all native, so their boards are more native than nonnative.

A more recent initiative exercised by Northland School Division to develop greater understanding of intracommunity needs and priorities was to schedule three Corporate Board meetings each year in selected school communities. As claimed by one respondent, this is achieving multiple benefits in terms of learning and understanding for both the host school community and the visitors representing other isolated communities:

I know when we went to [one school community], they've been complaining about that school for years [at Corporate Board meetings], and when we finally went there and saw it, everybody can understand what's going on and why, and you have more of an idea of what's happening. You see the community too, and you can relate better, because these people see Mistassiniy as this big school, and we're just a community like the rest of them. So I think it'll be good [to have the Corporate Board meeting here]. It gives us a chance to shine; it gives us a chance to show off, and show off our school and our drama club, and show them what we're about. And we might be a big school, but we're organised, and we have something to be proud about. I think that's good.

In addition to representing their respective L.S.B.C. as a Corporate Board member, local board chairpersons also represent communities on one of the standing committees. One board member described his understanding of the function of these committees:

They have other committees also. They have the Transportation Committee, the Maintenance Committee, Education Committee. I think they've got four committees. How they form that is, I think the four chairpersons form the committees. I don't even know what the hell they call that. Anyway, they've got committees which recommend to the Corporate Board. Again, it's all recommendations—from here [the community] to the committee, and then from the committee to the [Corporate Board].

The example proffered by one board member of committee work in action was described in the following way:

If a local school board decided to change part of their education program, they would first recommend to the Education Committee of the Corporate Board, then it could say yes or no, it would have to make a recommendation to the Corporate Board, and sometimes [the process] takes quite a while because it has to go through [these] steps. Although, financing for the actual students is worked out on a per capita basis, and that's adhered to.

As reported by one respondent, local board decision-making outcomes which require funding are addressed by the Finance Committee prior to recommendation to the Corporate Board:

At the Corporate Board we have what is called the Finance Committee. They sit down and work through all the different projects that are asked for and everything, and then they visit their budget and they figure out priorities and so forth from everywhere. And then those priorities are all brought to the Corporate Board, and everybody goes through them to see which ones are going to be approved and which ones aren't. So if you've got [a priority] at the local level, you can actually bring it through the steps [to Finance Committee and then Corporate Board] for discussion and decision.

### **The Policy Process**

In terms of local community input to the policy-making process at the Corporate Board level, board members expressed a range of different perspectives. As evidenced in the following statements, some people were happy with the level of input:

But as far as the policies that are made, as local school boards we have input into the policy making. Anything that comes up maybe at the corporate level or through some other channel, then we have a chance to look over the policy. And certainly we also have the autonomy of making our own local policies as local school board members, within the range of our terms of reference.

To another board member, the support of a strong, experienced Northland School Division administration was useful in terms of screening input by representatives of L.S.B.C.s to the policy-development process:

I think at the Corporate Board level, though, you kind of eliminate a lot of problems because they've hired a good administration over there, and they go through all these policies; they revise them and check with lawyers and whatever. Whatever has to be done, by the time it gets back to the

Corporate Board level, it's pretty well a good policy, and it doesn't take much to go through them and explain them and get a vote on whether it's good or not.

The process of policy development which pertains specifically to the respective L.S.B.C.s and may be addressed at the community level in accordance with the clearly defined terms of reference for L.S.B.C. management was described by one interviewee in the following words: "We make those decisions, and they are actually carried out. Whether it's a recommendation or not, it's still our responsibility to [make the decision]. It's just rubber stamped from there on."

However, another board member suggested that the process involved more than "a fleeting formality."

It's kind of a hazy area, I guess, but the local school boards do make a lot of decisions. And when it's above what they can actually approve locally, it's taken by the chairperson to the Corporate Board; and if that chairperson makes a good presentation, then we have no problem.

Clearly, the latter perceptions of community involvement in decision making at the Corporate Board level were not necessarily shared by all local board members interviewed. One board member stated:

All we do is recommend. . . . It's just, the head guys are meeting while the audience watches, and I can't speak. . . . I think if a board member tried anything drastic, he would, I don't now, probably would be disciplined—who can fire a board member?

### **Advocacy of Structural Change**

For some board members the trust for increased decision making by L.S.B.C.s required a restructuring of current governance arrangements, as suggested in the following interview excerpt:

And if local people, the school is going to feel more positive impact, I think the structure has to change further to allow more decentralisation, to maybe dissolve the Corporate School Board as it exists to a point where maybe it's broken up into five or six school divisions and where our school would at least [have] equality, and this disparity in terms of



resources given to us wouldn't be there as much. I feel it has to change, I really do. Until that happens then, we're going to be frustrated, and at least I will always feel that there's inequality.

A restructuring of Corporate Board governance arrangements appeared to be a primary objective for board members. However, the inherent challenges in effecting such change were recognised by at least one participant:

I guess that's where I feel some impatience, because I see this monolithic monster that's changed a little bit, but it's not changed enough to satisfy the needs of the local school and the community. It has to change more, but it's hard to make that change in the structure because there are some people that have kind of bought into the system the way it is, the structure the way it is.

The implications of maintaining governance arrangements on their current course at the cost of increased authority at the L.S.B.C. level prompted a lively reaction by one board member:

Now, if you were to use that analogy [of Indian Affairs as our mother and our father] with the Corporate School Board, it's good in some cases the way it's structured, but in some cases I feel that it's just like Indian Affairs in a way, where they are *the* ones that make the decisions; they are the power over there. And I feel a little bit resentful of that because of our experience as Indian people under Indian Affairs; we were kids. I don't want the Corporate School Board to look at this community or myself or this school as entities or individuals that cannot take care of themselves. I think we are big enough in this community to be responsible and accountable, and I wouldn't want the corporate school structure, the Corporate School Board, to think or to say that we are not, because I think we are. And as long as there is that structure still intact and no changes are happening—there have been some, but not enough—then we're always going to be going to the corporate level at Peace River on our hands and knees and saying, "Give us, give us"; and they won't, because there's twenty-three that are saying the same thing.

The understanding expressed by a number of board members indicated that increased devolutionary authority at the community level would also require a significantly higher level of accountability by L.S.B.C.s. One respondent viewed this as a prospective challenge to L.S.B.C. effectiveness:

We have to be very careful about that, because if you give power to somebody or a group that doesn't know how to use that power properly and effectively, there can be chaos. . . . But if you have a community that has potential, that can be responsible, and has the right philosophy, the

right values, principles, all that good stuff, and has the good of the children and the school at heart, then there's potential for a new decentralisation of power to be used properly.

According to two board members, the original purpose was to facilitate the development of smaller systems through a decentralisation process:

- But what I understand is, when Northland was formed, it was with the intention of not surviving. Northland was formed to be a stepping stone to individual school systems, that eventually it would break up.
- I believe that was the Northland School Act of 1983, which talked about a ten-year time limit.

An ongoing problem aligned to current governance arrangements described by one respondent was associated with the multiple layers of bureaucracy:

I think there's too many people involved right now; there's too many different levels of everything. We're almost like government; there's too many levels everywhere. . . . The principal runs the school, and then there's the area superintendent, who guides the principal or advises the principal, and then the board advises him. . . . I think the Area Offices could be gone. I don't feel that they're really a vital part. I think we could be served better if we had an area person, even if he was in the school, if we had more of a liaison than a supervisor. Like the pedagogical supervisors, they do a lot for our teachers. And if we had somebody like that, a liaison, or somebody at Central Office that we could phone instead of having to go through him, and then he goes to him.

The reality in practice of "too many bosses" produced an outcome of confusion for one board member:

There's too many places where, if you have a problem, it just gets blown out of proportion by the time it gets to administration; . . . second-hand information: This guy said that, and this guy—you're getting two-handed stuff, and I think we could do away with them [the Area Office].

For one respondent, direction at the corporate governance level was clearly perceived:

First, better representation at the local level. That means equitable representation at the local level, so that a school of 400 students which has a board of seven should be much better represented than Pelican Mountain, which is about as well represented as Mistassiniy because it has a board of five for 50 children. And [second], there would have to be a change in Corporate Board structure. They can't have it both ways. They either should decentralise completely—authority, funding—or centralise, so that people are not continually subjected to multiple levels of bureaucracy, as seems to be the case now.

## Understandings and Experiences of Mistassiniy

### L.S.B.C. Organisation and Practice

During a group interview with L.S.B.C. members, one participant posed the following question:

If education is so important, we've got to ask ourselves, what's happening at the Local School Board Committee level?

Subsequently, elected trustees to the Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. shared a range of perspectives regarding the ways in which they attempted to organise themselves and the priorities they established to make a difference to education in their school community.

### Education Priorities

According to one board member, the school was a focus for the L.S.B.C.'s objective to improve education:

I think the school is the priority, and the kids are the priority, and as long as we can come to a mutual agreement of what's best for the kids, whether it's the discipline program or whether it's having detentions after school and a bus that takes the kids home after school. We have to respect the parents, and they have to respect us too. They have to respect what we're trying to do here at the school. We're trying to make it a safe environment for their kids, and they have to try and understand that too.

To assist the achievement of this objective, the L.S.B.C. has developed a mission statement which identifies specific goals for the education of children attending Mistassiniy School. The broad terms of the mission statement, according to one informant,

is to get better schooling for the kids and, in general, to have them taught what it takes to live out there, to make a living . . . wherever they choose to live, yes. I would think that people should move out of here. If there are better chances over there, why not?

Realisation of the goals identified in the mission statement developed by the L.S.B.C. implies the active involvement of trustees in the school's program. The understanding of one board member in this sphere was described accordingly:

I think we can have a say in getting more relevant material into the curriculum, that way trying to [have an input]. A lot of the curriculum out there that's set up by the Alberta government is so irrelevant to these kids here, so we can have a say in that. Or policies, or instigate making our school a safe place. We can put policies into effect or rules or whatever for the school that will make it a safe environment for the kids.

However, this responsibility, according to one trustee, requires the development of an increased level of L.S.B.C. learning and authority:

There is flexibility there, I think, to make changes in policy and programming, but I think it depends on the local school boards whether they're active enough or they understand enough about the power that they can have to make policy changes and so on. I think it comes through time, because the power of the board is only going to be recognised if we all understand how much power we really have. Right now we're kind of unsure, but I think the impact could be felt later once the group, as a group, understands that, yes, they can make an impact.

The experience of one board member involved in making changes to the curriculum was recalled with some degree of frustration:

Since I've been on the board, when I started they didn't have any Cree instruction here, the local native language and culture. That wasn't part of the school, and since I've been on it has happened. It took a long time at the corporate level and down here to get the people to want to have that; it took a long time. There were lots of meetings, and they published a book, and everybody wanted to have their little two bits in that book. And, oh, they had a terrible time to get this one book that was going to be part of the curriculum. . . . Mainly the Corporate Board members. It took about a year, I think, for them to come up with one book. . . . It was very slow and ponderous, because of the native language, the way they speak here, and a hundred miles away a little different dialect. "No, it's got to be this way; this is the right—" "No, no, that's the right way."

### Discipline Policy

The L.S.B.C. is currently involved in the development of a new discipline policy initiated by the school. This was discussed by one board member:

We're just starting to get into it. [The school] just gave us a copy of it, and we'll be discussing it at our next meeting, things like that, and I think it's about time, and I think the parents are all for it. They know that something's got to be done, and if they can't do it at home, they need help. They don't know how to talk to their kids or how to discipline their kids or what's the best way of doing it. Well, I know for myself, I've tried all different kinds of things and finally came up with [one strategy], but then even that only works for a little while; you've got to change

around. But I find the native people have trouble with it. They've never had to really discipline, and now that the kids are getting out in the world they find there's different problems and they have to. But I think they're open to it; I think they're open to everything.

### **Recognition of Student Achievement**

A further initiative of the L.S.B.C. recently was to recognise and promote widely the achievements of students both within the community and on a wider divisional level.

At Christmas I was very proud. Our kids had a penny drive, and they raised almost a thousand dollars in just pennies. They had them all in this room. We were very proud of that, just pennies. And the basketball team, their placements in the division. Something like that is good to recognise and talk about.

A participant described an initiative undertaken on a wider divisional level:

That's something I've started [doing too]: Every board meeting I usually have something to say that the students' union has done, and I've found now, since I've started doing it, the other schools are starting to do it, where they'll tell something that's going on in the school. It's irrelevant, got nothing to do with the board, but it's information, it's something that we're proud of as a board that our kids have done this, and I want to share it with everybody. The others are starting to do it, and I really like that.

### **Interaction with Parents**

For one participant, a further means of making an impact as a board member involved actively and publicly supporting school-based initiatives:

being a voice in the community, . . . being visible in the school, being available to support teachers and parents. For example, if teachers want to have a field trip or something like this, one time they wanted to go down the Wabasca River with their canoes, and some of the parents think, "Well, that'll be scary. They might be going down the rapids and get drowned," so I think to myself, well, the oldtimers, that was the way they used to travel, and these people have still got arms and legs; they can do it. And boy, when they come back they're so proud how they toughed it out like that when they go on these trips and that. As a board member here I can kind of smooth the waters and help them do some of these things that are a little bit radical like that. Like now, they want to go to

France for a trip here next year. Well, if everybody's against any change that's never been done there, they'll never go anywhere, but if a board member comes in and supports them and approves it, well, it helps.

The value of interacting with parents was also viewed by one interviewee as an important board member role responsibility:

I think we need a lot more of that process as well, a one-to-one, or maybe just a group of parents sitting together and talking. But there certainly isn't enough of it going on, and I think that's probably the area where a lot of us are lacking, where we don't have that kind of contact with the parents as much as we'd like to.

It was reported by one respondent that although many board members have full-time jobs and find it difficult to assist with school-based activities on a regular basis, others do become involved and assist with such activities as field trips, particularly where their own children are concerned. Other participants expressed a need for increased involvement in this area of trustee responsibility.

The comments of one board member indicated that the dropout problem was also being addressed at the community level:

We're trying to institute, trying to get people back into the system. And then a lot of these kids who have dropped out in the last few years, we have also got the AVC into place now, so that when they turn nineteen or whatever and they say, "Geez, I made a mistake. I need some schooling," we have the AVC now where they can come back in and get adult upgrading and get on from there. . . . One such student is applying for funding to go out to university next year, and he's just now finishing his Grade Twelve through AVC this year, so it's things like that that we really like to see.

### **Community Education**

It was the view of one interviewee that a primary task for the L.S.B.C. was to educate the community:

That, I think, is one of our jobs as a local board, is to get out and kind of wake up the community: "Get involved. This is your school, your kids' future. You have to [help]. We can't do it alone," because our hands are tied. It takes the public to scream before something is done.

In supporting this proposition, a fellow trustee suggested that parent-community awareness and education were increasingly a part of the community-education process:

Oh, yes, yes. But that's coming, that's happening now. There's a lot of people that are taking more interest in the community and getting involved more. It's hard to get people involved, but once you start and they see it's not so bad, they'll come around. . . . The school [board] has to work on making the people aware that education is important and has to get parents into the school; that has to happen. And once you do that, and once the parents become more and more educated, then things are going to take off. It made a lot of progress over the years that way.

However, in supporting the concept of increased parental involvement, one board member identified and described a current barrier to this objective:

People are also scared of the board. They figure we're unapproachable, that you can't go to the board, or you only go to the board if you have a problem, or something like that. We've got to be more public; we've got to involve them more, to have more public meetings, to have some public forums, to have discussions and things, and that's starting, it's just starting.

One respondent suggested in the following comment that people in the community need to understand that individual board members have no authority to act as an individual, and they should present their problems to the board:

I think a lot of people feel more at ease, more safe, talking as an individual. But if you can get it through that they don't have to come and be present, if they just want to send a letter to us we can discuss it as a board, or things like that . . . But I don't think people realise that they are allowed at our meetings; I don't think people know that they're public.

In exploring possible reasons for the hesitation exhibited by some parents in documenting concerns, a L.S.B.C. member pointed out: "If parents put a concern to the meeting, it is recorded in the minutes . . . with the person's name, . . . and people don't like taking that risk." On the other hand, as suggested by one participant, "those board members who *are* approached by the community because of their reputation or their position of employment in the community" reported a little more purposeful interaction with parents. Nonetheless, it was felt that a need existed

for greater public awareness of roles and responsibilities of board members, as noted in the following statement:

I get a lot of people coming to me and saying, "You're on the board. Why don't you guys do this? Why don't you guys do this?" The problem in this community is, they don't realise that they should come up or put it on paper. It's taken a long time to get them to realise they've got to write things down and bring it to a quorum instead of just going to one board member.

Given the diversity inherent in the multicultural enrolment characteristic of this school community, it was claimed by one respondent that the L.S.B.C. could be instrumental in constructing "bridges of cultural understanding"

because they're all students; they're working for the same goals. And you don't think of students in those cases as either treaty or nontreaty or nonnative; they're students. The dividing line basically comes in times of funding, where, hey, this is where the dollars are coming from, and it's more or less removed from the school. Once we identify who's who and where they live, that's for the bean counters.

### **Decision-Making Authority**

According to one informant, this new way of thinking about education and culture "is done basically through the education itself." However, notwithstanding the many positive indicators related to the L.S.B.C.'s organisational goal to make a difference in education in this community, one board member argued that limited authority at the local level impeded the realisation of this objective:

We don't have much authority. We're just tied up, and we are restricted as to how much we can do. . . . The government has made sure that it's made those policies, I guess, and we have to follow that policy. A lot of times we want to say something or do something, but you are restricted. . . . Just motions, motions and recommendations from the principal. . . . I mean, you're elected by the people; you're not an appointee, you're elected, so you should have the power. Any time you're elected you're given the power to demonstrate to do the things that people want. . . . Yes, they get elected, and your powers are instructed to you right after the election, right after you've been elected. That's the time I knew right away that I had no power. . . . A person from Alberta School Trustees instructed us. I don't know how much they can do in terms of changing government policy. I think the local politicians can do that.



Clearly, the aspiration of educational change was blurred by roadblocks, for one participant:

For me, personally, I would like to get rid of the restrictions and have more local control, have more power. This way, you don't have any power; you're just a committee, that's it. . . . You can't even discuss a problem here within. For instance, if a kid has a problem, you cannot discuss it with the board without going in camera. You don't see those things in the minutes.

This perspective was echoed by one other trustee, who challenged the local school board to exercise leadership initiative and change current organisational practices to improve educational services:

It's up to the local school board to open up discussions on education, . . . speak out for the kids. . . . Don't be afraid because things have always happened this way. Look to the future. . . . We can't be strapped down by policies and structures. We must work out what is best for our children and be prepared to change the way education is delivered.

### Summary

The stories presented by five members of the Mistassiniy L.S.B.C., two members of the Wabasca L.S.B.C., and one member of the Pelican Mountain L.S.B.C. in the Wabasca-Desmarais community clearly described the current efforts of elected trustees to surmount the outcomes of a community history characterised by division and change. The lifting of the invisible boundary separating the Wabasca-Desmarais communities prior to the 1992 election liberated members of the community to participate as candidates and/or constituents in the election process for either Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. or Wabasca L.S.B.C. This change promoted community-wide interest in the Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. election process, and 12 candidates campaigned for election to seven positions on Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. It appears that treaty Indian elected representatives have dominated the members of L.S.B.C.s for a number of years in the Wabasca-Desmarais community. However, in 1992 the community elected about half (treaty) and half (nontreaty) to the L.S.B.C. and a

nonnative chairperson. In view of a 40% nontreaty school enrolment, this balance of representation is seen to be appropriate by board members interviewed.

In recognising a need for organisational growth and a further development of cohesion within the L.S.B.C. membership, participants suggested that the community voted for candidates whom they believed could 'make changes' and release them from years of governance oppression. However, it was recognised that the L.S.B.C. required full community support for such change, and current community attitudes and division were seen as a particular challenge which required intensive community education programs. As trustees of the largest school in Northland School Division, Mistassiniy board members expressed frustration with a perceived inequity of funding in schools in the division and many of the bureaucratic processes which hinder a process of localised decision making to meet locally identified needs and priorities. A further consideration for the Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. at this point in time is the proactive role of the Bigstone (Cree) Band Council in educational governance priorities. The publicised proposal to "open its first-hand controlled school . . . for children of band members only" suggests a particular challenge for the Mistassiniy L.S.B.C., which is representative of the Band Council and the wider community. More recent negotiations between the seven Bigstone Band schools in Northland School Division considered the establishment of a small school division to encompass all students under the same tuition agreement within one band-controlled governance system. While board members presented a range of understandings about the perceived shape of this proposed governance structure, it was clear that all trustees interviewed seek the development of a community-based education system which bridges the cultural divisions and which serves the complex priorities of all segments of the community. The current elected L.S.B.C. has a crucial role to play in this immediate challenge.

## Chapter 7

### Atikameg-Sovereign Local School Board Committee

#### Understandings and Experiences of Context

##### Geographical Location and Setting

The small isolated community of Atikameg is located approximately 100 kilometres northeast of High Prairie and 500 kilometres northwest of Edmonton. It is accessible by gravelled road, and there is no form of public transport linking the community with High Prairie. The current population of 'around 700' persons is almost exclusively status Indian and Metis, apart from the nonnative essential-services employees such as school-based staff. According to one participant in the study:

There used to be seven hundred, but probably there's a little more, I don't know now, because we have seven on Council, and I think for one councillor it's a hundred people. Yes, I think that's the way it works. . . . I guess it just varies. Not many people leave the community . . . unless to get an education.

The Whitefish reserve is surrounded by a number of lakes, including Big Lake, Whitefish Lake, and other smaller lakes adjacent to a more recently settled area of land known as Mile Four. During a drive around this community, a guide to the researcher explained that

In the 1970s the band acquired machinery which enabled the clearing and opening up of land on this reserve, which was previously virgin bush. The homes, which were owned by Alberta, were not purchased by the band, although they were offered to the band, and subsequently they were sold to Gift Lake Metis Colony. The band replaced these homes with trailers, in many cases established on the same sites from which the houses were removed. And then began the opening up of new roads, a movement away from the centre of the community. . . . There is a store which is located in the Metis colony, very close to the border of the reserve. Goods in the Metis colony store are taxable—GST—while goods in the store and the confectionery situated on the reserve are nontaxable. We used to have a Hudson Bay there where the E&E Store is now.

It appears that more recent community access to land has distributed the residential part of this community from what was once a compactly situated community located on the shores of the picturesque Whitefish Lake, as conveyed in

the following comment: "And people are spreading out. They're not in one community any more; they're moving out." Apart from treaty people moving out from the central area of this community to more 'rural' newly established areas, it appears that movement of Metis people has also occurred, as described by one interviewee:

Some of them [the Metis] that lived in Mink Creek are living now in Gift Lake. I think it's because of the colony. I think when they got their land, that's when they moved, because there's the colony, and this is a reserve we live in, and they live in the colony because they're not treaty.

There are relatively few employment opportunities in this community, and it was suggested by one informant that "the Whitefish community accept welfare as the way of life." The employment situation was further described by another respondent:

[The] only places where parents work [are] the Health Centre, the Band Office, and the RCMP office—and we have the plumber, and there's some people there that work with him. And what else? We have the stores; we've got two stores on the reserve. The C&D has groceries and all that, and it has a little bit of clothing, but just a little bit. And the other one is more like a confectionery. So that's the only places people work. And for the men, I think some of them are slashing right now; I think they're out. . . . Yes, there is a lot of welfare involved in this community.

The community has made at least one attempt to develop industry in the area. According to one participant, "Some years ago a log cabin was built by the community to establish a fish plant. This survived as an industry for a while and provided jobs for local people"; however, the building is unoccupied today. Fishing is a popular community activity during the summer months, and most families 'smoke' fish that are caught at that time. Most of the community hunt and smoke moose and other animals for food.

As we travelled along this main road, we crossed the border into the Metis Gift Lake colony and drove around by the Metis store before heading back into the Whitefish Indian Reserve central area of the community. The business centre of the Whitefish community is central to the reserve and is dominated by a modern and spacious Band Office complex which consists of three levels of accommodation for a

Band Office staff of 37 employees. Nearby is a well-maintained building which accommodates the band-controlled Early Childhood Services program. Situated adjacent to the Band Office is a store, the Health Services, and the R.C.M.P. offices. A drive along the shores of Whitefish Lake of approximately two kilometres from the business centre of the community took us to the Atikameg-Sovereign School, a large, sporadic physical plant which accommodates Grades 1-12 students. Other buildings noted in this area of the community include the original log-cabin, one-teacher school, a Roman Catholic church, and teacherages provided by Northland for staff attached to the school.

### **Provision of Educational Services**

Although extensive efforts were made by the researcher to trace significant events in the life of this community and its educational history, little seemed to be available in document form. Further, it appeared to the researcher that, while respondents were prepared to talk freely about a range of other experiences, there was a common reluctance by many to talk about their understandings of events in the history of this community. As explained by one respondent:

So many of the current generation actually went away from the community for their schooling to mission schools, and therefore those who *are* back in the community now and working in paraprofessional jobs and other jobs probably don't have any personal experience of those years of development that are really probably so important, in retrospect, to their understanding of some of the things that are happening in this community today. This is a very different trend from most native communities, because in so many communities culture is intrinsically linked to the history and language of the community.

Further, it was indicated by one interviewee that the nature of many of the historical experiences encouraged people to think and talk more ~~about~~ the present than the past:

People in this community really don't want to think about 'yesterday' or the past, that they're always hoping, they live in the present and hope that it's better, that in fact the todays and the tomorrows are really the times when things are different, because the past wasn't good, for whatever reasons.

However, some historical data were gleaned from Chalmers (1985), who described efforts by the Alberta government in the late 1950s to provide educational services around this Atikameg area:

A new school district was established and a school was built around the Janvier Indian Reserve. A school district was erected at Atikameg to permit a tuition agreement with Indian Affairs and assure the right of non-Indian children to attend the Indian schools there.

Assistance was also provided to the mission schools. At Grouard, Wabasca, Trout Lake, and elsewhere, the Minister of Education established school districts and assumed control of the schools through his official trustees. The Department of Education immediately made large sums of money available for both capital and operating expenses with a corresponding improvement in school services. (p. 11)

One respondent recalled her childhood experiences and other memories of education in Atikameg at this time:

It's changed a lot, because we used to go to school in a one-room. It was a big building, because the sisters and the nuns lived there, and we had this one room that was our classroom. I think there were Four or Five, Six, Seven, . . . five different grades in one class. And that teacher, I think she was there for thirty or more years. . . . And there was one [teacher] at the elementary. She had One, Two, Threes in one classroom. This old building over here [near the present school building]. . . . I guess that was a church. I don't remember seeing it, what it looked like. That's where she used to teach. The reason why I remember clear, because we used to go in there and clean it up. I was kind of a janitor, but I was a child. I must have been twelve or thirteen. I used to go sweep up after school and dust. I liked it; I enjoyed helping the sisters.

According to the limited historical documentation uncovered about the development of educational services in this area, the presence of both the Anglican and the Catholic churches significantly influenced early endeavours to provide educational services in this community until the advent of Northland. It was reported by Chalmers (1985) that

two Indian schools operated at this point—and never the twain did meet. Sovereign, named after a former Bishop of Athabasca, had as its teacher the wife of the Anglican missionary. Atikameg boasted a staff of two

nuns. The rivalry between the two groups was intense. Some parents bounced their children back and forth between the two schools, depending on which served the better noon lunch. Eventually, Indian Affairs had to decree that once a child began the school year at one school, he could not transfer to another until the beginning of the following school year.

After careful negotiation, Northland leased the buildings of the two schools, retained the staff, and organised four classrooms, including one in the Roman Catholic parish hall, on a grade rather than a religious basis. The Anglican rector's wife found herself with a Roman Catholic nun as her principal and another as one of her colleagues on the combined school staff—and the heavens did not fall.

Northland soon housed the four classrooms—up one from the Indian Affairs regime—in a new school building. The Division was careful to retain the names of both preexisting institutions; the new edifice was called the Sovereign-Atikameg School. (p. 10)

As we walked around the school building, one interviewee spoke briefly about her experiences at this time:

And that part [of the school] is where we went. I think it was 1960—I'm not really clear on this one, what year the school was built, this old part, because, did you notice we have steps as you were coming in? That's the old part; that's the school I went to, but the sisters were still here. I don't remember the year, but I think it was '61, I think.

The change of educational governance in this small community in the early 1960s was well remembered—with some misgivings—by one board member:

Yes. They [Northland] started in 1964. Prior to that the nuns [ran the school]. But we always said it was a better feeling when the nuns did [run the school], because the nuns used to visit us. They made us like part of a family, because some of my kids—you started with the nuns, eh? Yes. It was like a family that visited us, and they weren't afraid to tell us how our children were doing. With Northland, when they started sending white people, it was a big, different story. Most white people thought that they'd come to these Indian communities and change us, which was very hard. And they'd say people weren't cooperating. How can you cooperate with somebody when you know right now—? I'm very sensitive. Maybe that's why I learned to be very sensitive. As soon as I see a person, I know the kind of person they are. I know, and I can talk to you over a phone, but [then] it was always degrading; they were more or less degrading some of our children.

To another respondent, those years of early-education experiences were painfully recalled as a time of separation from the family, loneliness, and loss:

I don't ever remember being driven to this school [in the community]. I was in the Joussard School, Joussard Residential School. I don't remember the year; I don't remember how old I was; I don't know who took me over there. And I'm sort of dealing with that now, because it

hurts; in the long run it affects you. Once you're in there, you're in there; you don't see your parents. I never saw my parents; for ten months I didn't see my parents. And as you're growing up, you wonder why you're there. How come you're not somewhere else, or how come you're not at your parents'? You know, these are the things that go through your mind. Like me, I'm in my forties now, and I still hurt for those years.

The new local community school, named Atikameg-Sovereign in honour of the two preexisting educational institutions (Anglican and Catholic), provided schooling which encompassed Grades 1-8. One 'student' about that time described her understandings of the situation:

There were quite a lot [of students], because we didn't have ECS [Early Childhood Services]. We had Grade One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six, Seven, Eight; and then when you were in Grade Nine you had to leave. When we left we went to Grouard School. There's a dorm there where you can stay. It was being run by Northland. That's that big AVC now [the new vocational college]. That's where we used to go to school. We lived there, but there were no nuns or sisters there, but there were just supervisors we had. So we really didn't have a choice, I guess. If you're done here, you're done in Grade Eight, and you'll have to go to Grouard. . . . But now we don't. We can go to Grade Twelve here because they have more room and more teachers.

Early parental involvement in education. Although details of early parental involvement in education in this community are sketchy, one board member explained that

they used to have what they call a Parent Committee at first. I used to be on it. But then, I don't know, Northland took over. . . . Some of the old Parent and Teacher Committees got absorbed into the Northland School Board. . . . They had these twenty-six communities, northern communities, with the Big Board there, members of the Big Board, twenty-six chairpersons, and they all have their little school boards at their own communities. I can't remember how many years it's been like that. I can't remember; quite a few years, though, they've had it like this now.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s the Atikameg community was involved in the Education North project—a social-intervention program instigated by the Alberta government. As documented by Ingram and McIntosh (1980), the Education North Project



aimed at the encouragement of parents, other community members, and teachers in small isolated northern community to work together in planning and developing activities which would better meet the needs of members of the communities, especially the school-age children. (p. 1)

The overall objective of the Education North project was to effect an improvement of the educational services in Northern communities through increased participation of the local community and its residents in various processes of education delivery. (p. 28)

The first of five goals specified for the achievement of this objective was

1. The development of increased parental support and community commitment to schooling by direct, active involvement in the local school's operation. (p. 28)

An Education North Society was established in Atikameg in 1980. Initially, difficulties associated with school staffing-related problems and community instability-related challenges impeded progress despite the determined efforts of a few members of the community. However, in evaluating the implementation of the Education North Project in Atikameg, Ingram and McIntosh (1981) reported:

The Atikameg-Sovereign North Society has managed to maintain its momentum over the course of the year, despite the setbacks one might expect would result from the many changes in leadership personnel—three presidents and three co-ordinators in seven months. (p. 47)

Observers of the Society cite three reasons for the relative success of this past year:

- (i) the improvement in school-community relations (which could be viewed as either a cause or an effect of the Society's success)
  - (ii) the improved morale and greater cohesiveness of the school staff
  - (iii) the strong support offered by the school staff—and especially the school principal, Jack Sullivan, to the Society
  - (iv) the influence of key community members, especially Mabel Grey.
- The major problem confronting the Society seems to be one of identifying and nurturing local leaders. (pp. 47-50)

**The school board concept.** For one board member, understandings of the beginnings of parental involvement in education within the Atikameg community were linked to well-remembered early experiences as a board member:

At that time when we first started our school board, it was the old part of that school. This was the new part here. That was the old part of that school. That's when we started our first education. It was all a volunteer thing; nobody wants to talk about money or anything, but it was all volunteer. And from that time I saw it was important in education for the

children to get their proper education and to get their education. From the beginning I was working for the children. From the beginning I've wanted to see more native people get to higher education and that eventually they can help their own native people, as teachers or anything, whatever they can get. It's how I looked at it. That's why I was so much interested in volunteering [for the board]. . . . It's a volunteer thing all the time, and we thought, well, if we volunteer, maybe we'll be able to get our children through the education we want, because I went through that myself.

Although the 'Big Board' in Peace River was comprised of predominantly nonnative people, according to one participant, it was 'governing' a native school community which had established a board of native trustees.

The time we had a local school board here, there was the Big Board in Peace River. They call it the Big Board in Peace River. At that time the Indian people didn't run that board. It was mixed in there. I think there was one native lady in there, and the rest were white people running that Big Board. So us here, the local school board, we're all the native people that run the board here.

Nonetheless, the understanding of one experienced board member was that people in this community have always been 'elected' to the board:

We were elected; we were elected. Right from the beginning we were elected, and that goes on and on. Different people sit on the boards; different ladies, different men sit on the board, and . . . one or two people have been sitting on that board for quite a few years.

What is the influence of parental involvement in education on this community in recent years? A visit to the school provided some background information.

**School priorities.** The motto of the school is "Success for Everyone," and this objective is echoed on the internal walls in colourful displays which include a school tapestry hanging in the gymnasium. This artistic masterpiece was collaboratively created by the students. Sports trophies, acknowledging sporting excellence across many decades, are displayed with pride in a cabinet towards the entrance of the hall. Each classroom door and each office door in the school building is labelled in the Cree language. The *Atikameg-Sovereign School Evaluation Report* of December 1990 provided a brief outline of administration priorities in the school and is a useful background for consideration of the activities of the L.S.B.C. elected in 1992:

### *School Organization*

The school operates under the jurisdiction of Northland School Division No. 61 and offers instruction to 160 students from Grade 1 through 9. In addition, instructional programming through the use of distant-learning resources is provided to six students in Grades 10 through 12. Instruction and administration is provided by a staff consisting of 14 certificated teachers, 6 paraprofessionals, and 6 support staff. This provides an overall teacher-student ratio of 11.4 Grade 1 to 9 and an adult-student ratio in the instructional program of 8.3 Grades 1 to 12.

The school begins for all students at 8:30 a.m. and runs until 3:20 p.m., except for Friday afternoon when students are dismissed at lunch break. This provides 1,520 minutes per week for instruction and provides a timetable which is consistent with the requirements of the school division and of Alberta Education.

### *Communication*

There is ample evidence of open communication between the school and the community. The interest of the local school board in the affairs of the school is very evident, and the principal attends all local board meetings. A number of community events are held during the year; the school staff members are involved in many of these. The fact that most of the paraprofessional staff are also parents of students at the school gives the staff first-hand opportunity to communicate with the community and to be aware of community values and beliefs. Numerous information sheets and newsletters are sent home with students to keep parents apprised of the school activities. A practice which must be highly commended is where the school staff personally deliver the report cards to the students' homes. New teachers find this a difficult process, but the results in terms of appreciation of the culture of the community is invaluable. (p. 8)

### *Student Attendance*

This topic is a major concern for administration, staff, and the evaluation team. The statistics for this school are, to say the least, discouraging. The attendance records for the year 1989-90 are shown below [and that ranges from a September 1989 percentage of 89.7 to a June percentage of 64.9; and in 1990, a September percentage of 72.1 down to 49.5 in June]. These statistics occur in spite of the efforts of the school, the local board and the school division. At the school, for example, the timetable is adjusted to attract students to school in the morning. The local band provides cash awards to students for attendance, and the school division also recognizes, through an award program, the attendance of students on a monthly basis. Staff and administration are frustrated by this situation, to say the least.

Many feel that the student transportation system is a major concern, of course, but the overwhelming feeling is that there is not a great deal of support among the majority of the parents for the goals and objectives of the school. Some parents, the local board in particular, want the students of this school to achieve the same level as students across the province.

Attendance statistics like this [achievement goals] make this an impossible dream. Any solution does not lie in each of the stakeholders acting independently of each other. (p. 9)

*Commendations*

Overall, the Cree program is good.

1. The elders, parents and community are to be commended that they have retained the Cree language on the Whitefish Lake Reserve.
2. Native support staff have also helped to keep the language alive by continually speaking Cree to the students.
3. The administration and staff allow Cree in the classrooms other than the Cree room, thus enhancing the Cree language and the culture on other subject areas.
4. There is articulation between grades in Cree.
5. There is good morale between the staff, between professionals and paraprofessionals.
6. The Cree program seems to be moving progressively. (p. 37)

*Communication with Parents and Community*

Since the Cree language instructors are from the community of the Whitefish Lake Reserve, there is continuous communication between parents and community. Whenever the instructors are unsure of certain terms in the Cree language, they go to their parents and elders of the community. (p. 35)

Understandings and Experiences of the Atikameg-SovereignL.S.B.C. Election in 1992"Half" the Community Ran for Election

As reported by a number of respondents, one of the strengths historically of the L.S.B.C. was the maintenance of a separate identity from that of the Band Council.

In the words of one participant:

The school board has had a direct identity as a decision-making group rather than a group directly affiliated with the Band Council, and this is a definite advantage in this community. It does mean, of course, that community members have two avenues to pursue their concerns: They can approach the school board; they can attend the meetings and put forward their claim there; and if nothing happens there, of course, they can then approach the Chief and Council. That's a real strength in the structure of the local government as it stands.

However, after years of a relatively low-key L.S.B.C. operation, significant attitudinal changes occurred prior to the 1992 election. One board member explained:

For some reason there was no interest in the school board there for a long time, and last fall they really surprised us. Cripes! How many ran, do you remember, for the school board? It must have been half of the community. All of a sudden there was this interest, so I thought, "Well, I don't have a chance. Most likely they want me out of there anyway, but

I'm going to run," because when I saw the names, and I know everybody, and there's a lot of corruption in some of these people, and I thought, "Oh, my God! If those people get in, what's going to happen to education, because they're not going to [help]."

The sudden interest in the L.S.B.C. election surprised other board members also, as the following comment by one respondent indicates:

Twenty-two. Yes, twenty-two ran. I don't know, because before I don't think there was that much interest. I don't know why [the interest] all of a sudden. This last term [this interest was new], this last election in September.

Although the unprecedented interest in running for election to the L.S.B.C. presented an unexpected change in routine in this community, perhaps the more significant outcome of the 1992 election was that the chief was elected as the Chairman of the L.S.B.C. As reported by one interviewee, this was an unusual phenomenon which created a situation which could well have compounded "difficulties emanating from the factions within the community."

### **Multiperspectives of the Election Process**

The stories related by interviewees about the 1992 Atikameg-Sovereign L.S.B.C. election exposed a range of individual board member understandings and experiences. In the view of one L.S.B.C. member elected to the 1992-94 L.S.B.C., the routine process is simply that

you have to get nominated first by seven people [on a] nomination paper, and then once you're nominated in, then if there's more than one running, then there's an election. More than seven? More than seven, yes, because there's seven board members. Oh, yes, yes, it has to be more than seven. In this election there were twenty-two people nominated, so it was a big vote.

Another elected board member perceived the process in the following way:

Well, it's good to talk to people [about it]; it's good. But you also just can come and get the nomination paper, and you just get five people to sign it, and they agree that you can be a board member.

In the opinion of one L.S.B.C. member, it was not considered important for candidates to articulate objectives for running for election:

It doesn't work that way really, to say that "I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that." We left it up to the people to decide. If they want to elect you, they will elect you, because we pretty well knew each other around this reservation, so we have an idea who can run for local school board. That's how we run our elections.

The understanding of the electoral process by one member of the L.S.B.C. included the identification of a specific procedural change following the 1983 legislation. This was described in the following way:

When the term's up we put posters up, and we put the date for the election and the nomination, and we call for a meeting. Then right in that meeting we call for nominations. All the parents and all the local school board members of this reserve [come to the meeting]. We didn't allow the teachers or somebody else; just amongst ourselves we have the election. Then we posted up for a certain date of election; then we opened the polls for the election. Just like government elections; that's how we run ours. Until the native people got in the Big Board, then they changed things. [Now] you have to get a three-year term, I think. And you've got to have a paper, though. You fill out a form, and you get five people to nominate you on that paper, and you turn it to the returning officer, and that's your nomination paper. . . . See, everything is done the same as years back, except that piece of paper; that's the only change we have on the elections. We choose a returning officer, a member [of the board]. . . . Usually, we've done everything locally, to tell you the actual things. We run everything locally. The only difference in the years back is that paper now today that we use for nominations; that's the only difference.

Community involvement in the L.S.B.C. election process at Atikameg-Sovereign was described by one respondent:

Well, there again it's like government policies. It's eighteen and up, but they can come as many as they want; they can vote as many as they want. We don't limit anybody or tell anybody not to come; they just come on their own. It could be a good turnout, and it could be a poor turnout, but still, whatever the turnout is, whoever gets the most votes gets in as a board [member].

However, the process is not without problems, according to the perception of one elected board member, not the least of which is a recognised need for community education aligned to the principles of democracy:

The way people elect, it's not only board members, but it's going to take time. This is why I say, they have to be educated. The way they've always elected is, the more friends and relatives you have, almost a guarantee you're going to get it. No matter if you don't know anything or you're corrupt, this is how it's been. It's the same with the school board.

### **Board Members Motivated by Quest for Better Education**

While one elected trustee believed that 'power' was an important motivation for prospective board members, the underlying motivation of grasping the opportunity for involvement in decision-making processes was paramount:

The people on the school board here, sure, they want power, but underneath I can see that most of them are really interested in the children's education here. They want to be able to make decisions concerning the native children because decisions that have been made previously, decisions that are made at Central Office or these Area Offices, they make them the best way they can, but somehow there are things that they don't take into consideration because it is not their fault that they do not see things our way, so they just make decisions like that. And then the chance comes up that we can become board members, and we take it, and some of them are quite vocal in their belief on how things should be done.

Some board members explained that they were motivated to become L.S.B.C. members because of their personal experiences of education. This is reflected in the following comments of one participant in the study:

Because I experienced that myself. I don't have that education, and I regret I didn't finish my education. I had a chance to finish it, but I was too smart when I was sixteen, so I just walked out of school. Now today I need that; I could have used that today. That's why I like to see the other younger people, younger generation, to finish their education so they'll use that in the future. Me, I have a hard time today. I'm not well educated, and there's lots of things that I couldn't understand. If I had gone to school in my days, I could have used it today. So that's why I would like to encourage the younger generation, younger kids that start to school, to continue on with their school and finish their education and get into something, because it's very important to see our children get their proper education; education is very important.

According to another respondent, the powerful motivating force of personal experience of education prompted ongoing membership on the L.S.B.C.:

I wanted, to me, a better education. I wanted the children to be able to compete anywhere in the world as far as education's concerned, as far as jobs are concerned, because that was uppermost in my mind when I raised my own family. I taught them to be independent. But then being independent and ambitious, you also need that education. I went up to Grade Nine, and I've been a lot of things. I think because of that, that was small education as far as I'm concerned, because I try to help my [children] now with [their high school work] once in a while, and it's all Dutch to me.

An apparent preoccupation with a need to provide their own children with better educational opportunities than they themselves had experienced was also cited by one participant as a motive for becoming a board member:

Why I got involved? I think it was because of my past experience. I worked at the school for four years. I was raised in a mission school for twelve-and-a-half years, and it didn't really bother me. All these years I was growing up, but then when my children started growing into the school age, I was already working by then. I was eighteen when I started working. But I always felt that I needed more education, and I always wanted this big dream I had that my kids would get the full education and perhaps some day do a lot of things that I would have liked to do, and I think I was living my life in my children, so it didn't work that way.

The opportunity to make a difference in education in the community generated interest in involvement in the L.S.B.C. for one participant:

And I don't want to see education being put away, that our students need that education. So this year when I first thought that I should run for the board, I want to help both the students and the community, so I thought, well, if there's some way I can help somebody, I'll try. That's how I first thought, and I've been a board member this year.

For one interviewee, an appreciation of the value of education provided the incentive for his commitment to trusteeship:

Without education it's pretty hard to get a job now. Even nowadays it's getting harder; you've just got to have the proper education, and you've got to have the qualifications to get the job. That's why I thought at that time, well, maybe we should try to help the children to get the proper education, and it was working good, it was nice, and people were just interested in it. People came to the meetings and tried to help out the best they can and the best they know, and the best we can and the best we know too, that we try to help our education.

I enjoy it, working as a board for the community, for the benefit of the children. It's nice to see the children get their education the proper way they should get, and the parents get involved.



For one elected trustee, employment at the school provided a learning experience which facilitated the development of new attitudes towards her parental responsibility pertinent to the involvement in her children's education:

And then I started working with the school, and I realised how—before when I used to stay home I used to just send my kids out there, never mind what's happening over there, sort of. They come home, take care of them, send them to school again. That's as far as I—I didn't know how to get involved with the school or anything. I never used to go and check up to see how everything's going.

The influence of increased awareness about the importance of educational priorities was an insight shared by one respondent:

Somewhere along the way in our lives there's a person that really gets to us and has instilled in us that education is important, so it stays with us, and then we are given a chance to be able to make decisions on our children's behalf. So some of us are really coming out of our shells, shall we say, and then that's when we start doing things, at a very slow, quiet pace at first, for most people, and then there's some of us that are quite vocal in what we believe. Then we are given a chance to apply for positions in a local school board, and we take this chance, because it's done by voting, and there's your chance to be a school board member.

One elected board member indicated that she was motivated to become involved in the L.S.B.C. because of an increasing personal interest in the administration of the school:

Well, for my interest in education, like how a school is run, and just want to be part of it and, well, it's for education of my children too. I've got two children going to school here. I like to help.

After many years' experience with the L.S.B.C., it was the opinion of one board member that community members elected to the L.S.B.C. have a multiplicity of reasons for becoming board members:

You get to know which ones are really working to improve education for their communities, and you get to know which ones are only trying to please their egos, and you get to know which ones are the ones that want to be in a battlefield all the time. Oh, yes, you get to know them; you get to learn a lot of things.

### **Expectations of Board Members Generated by Educational Values**

In a highly competitive field of candidates nominated for election to the L.S.B.C. in 1992, what were the reasons for the community 'electing' particular candidates to the board? A number of elected board members provided individual understandings of why the community voted for some candidates and not for others.

In the opinion of one interviewee:

[The community] look for people that are interested in children; they look for people that are interested in education; they look for people that can organise the board meetings; or they look for a person that's trustable; and they look for a person that's dependable. Just all kinds of things, that's what they look for. They make the decision on election day. As I said, we know each other here so well that they know who to choose and who to elect on that day, who to vote for. That's how they looked at it.

The belief of another participant was that the community voted for people who would help to improve education:

And we've talked to people, and if you go out here and walked around here and you met somebody and you talked to him and ask him, "How do you think about education?" right away they'll respond to you that they want their children to be educated. That's the main thing parents here have in their mind, is that they want their children to be educated.

Although confident that the community respected candidates who were educated, one interviewee suggested that the value of the wisdom of Elders elected to the L.S.B.C. was an important consideration:

If at all possible, it is better when an educated native sits on the school board because they know about education, and with the native children in mind, they can make better decisions. But even though some are not educated—for instance, our Elders. Sure, they do know about education in their way, and they can really think things out; and in their wisdom they know, they know what's going on, and if they are asked, they will advise. So it would be nice if some Elders were also on the school board.

According to one board member, the community voted for candidates who were prepared to represent them in the more difficult community and educational challenges:

I think most times they look for somebody that's going to bring out their complaints. Now, how would I use that? It's just that, use them like for weapons. I don't know why they let me in. I was surprised, I really was,

because there were only two of us that got back in from the old board, so that really surprised me. . . . And sometimes when I bring out my thoughts in meetings, a lot of people will get mad at me, but it's not because they think I'm wrong, but it's because, "Why did it have to come from her?" But why does it come from me? Because nobody else will bring those things up. And it got to the point where parents started depending on me, and I think that's why I got back in. I was going to quit, I was going to quit; I was going to just do my own thing here, and I decided to run [for election to the L.S.B.C.].

The perception of one interviewee about community expectations of the board members was simply, "[They want] people who are ambitious, friendly, . . . and have a real concern for people, I guess." One board member felt that the community wanted to be represented by people who would "get involved in the programs, the planning, and see what their kids are learning."

The level of community awareness of the role of elected L.S.B.C. members was estimated by one board member, who also suggested a degree of community misinterpretation of board member role responsibility:

I'd say seventy-five percent think that they know what [board members] should do. They know that we know what they expect us to do, like, to improve education and make it easier for everybody. But twenty-five percent think that we are just there as weapons for their complaints, which we are not.

In the opinion of one board member, the community has high expectations of the performance of an elected board member. This is conveyed in the following comment:

If they don't do what people feel they should be doing, I guarantee they're not going to be voted in again. . . . Some communities will fight and try and either force that person to be removed, or else they will try to find ways, but it's pretty hard to let somebody go once you've elected them; and except for the chair, which is flexible, the members may have to resign. I think it's bad now. At one time you had to miss three meetings, you're automatically out. But for a while there you couldn't; then all of a sudden that came back, which is good. But see, committee members have to know there's a difference between a committee member and, say, Chief and Council there.

### **An On-the-Job Approach to Board Member Learning and Development**

While a number of respondents espoused the importance of education, many informants described personal experiences of "lost educational opportunities" to acquire skills which may have enhanced their credibility as board members. For many, the experience of working as board members provided an invaluable means of learning and development. According to two interviewees:

- So I've been already involved as a school committee volunteer. . . . We've got together this one time and we wanted something done, and somebody said we had to have a committee.
- [As a board member] I think I knew what to do, as far as I'm concerned. But then we had the area officers who are the superintendents now—they were called area officers—who were there to give us advice if we needed it, and it didn't take me long to take advantage of our position, because I knew it was something that we'd long waited for. At last we can say what we want our children to learn in school, you know, this kind of thing.

It was considered important by one participant for board members to read the available documentation which explained board member responsibilities:

We're supposed to read our manual. . . . Everything's in there, all the procedures of a meeting. We follow that manual [Northland School Division Manual]. And . . . there's one from the Education Minister about policies, . . . and, yes, the role of a trustee, and we need that. . . . [It tells us] what we're supposed to do.

The approach adopted by one recently elected trustee to learning and development was described in the following way: "Well, right now I'm just going to meetings and finding out what—I'm just absorbing right now, getting to know the procedures of the meetings, because they have a different procedure than other meetings."

In the opinion of one respondent, the use of personal resources and the pursuit of more formal board member training were an important combination for development:

To bring some of themselves into the meetings—and *that* when they're making decisions. . . . They need to bring part of themselves into the school board meetings to make decisions, but they also need to be educated; they need to go to workshops. . . . Both of them are very important.

In further exploring the benefits associated with the value of board member education, two interviewees provided the following perspectives:

- Most of the people on the school board are educated; they've had some kind of education, whether it's just summer courses or week-long courses, because there are workshops available for school board members; or they could go to teachers' workshop, and they learn about the education system.
- Usually, when we had an elected school board, we had people that had had education. Like this year, we had a gentleman there that's well educated. He was in Grade Twelve, and then he's got some degree papers, and he's really educated. But his main concern was that he wants other students to be to that place where he's at.

Nonetheless, there was a general recognition conveyed by participants in the study that newly elected board members "have some idea" of what trusteeship involves and learn as they experience the on-the-job role responsibility. The understanding of one respondent was expressed in the following terms:

When you are first elected, they sort of have an idea, though, what's all about the school board. They have a bit of experience on it, because it's a small community, it's a small reservation, and when election day comes for the board, they have an idea what they'll be doing. They don't just walk in there and sit in there and don't look around or don't know what to do; they know what is going on, and they pick up right away. The first board meeting, they pick it up right away, and from there they just go along with the other board that had the experience. They ask and they listen; they're good listeners the first meeting, sort of; the first six months they're good listeners, and they pick up right away.

However, in the opinion of one interviewee, the volumes of documentation available for board members to study require a lot of time and commitment:

We've got a School Act, we've got the manuals, we've got the bylaws, and we've got the policies to follow, . . . and we've got to study that, and we also have Big Board policies that we study ourselves. That comes from Head Office in Peace River. But those policies, they keep adding up every month, because when they have a meeting, if they need a policy to be added, they talk about it and they make a policy, and it's a lot of reading and a lot of study.

Apart from individual board member learning and development activities, the idea of a workshop to help newly elected board members was supported by one trustee:

I think it would be a wise thing to do, to have workshops for the local school boards, because that would help there to have a workshop for them. In fact, we're going to try to call one ourselves. Yes, this year, because it will help the new bodies. They'll pick up lots of things what the local school board means, although they have that manual that they could have studied it and the bylaws and the policies and the School Act, because we've got a School Act too, so we've got everything [to learn] as a school board.

It was envisaged that the agenda for this training workshop would include a number of activities directly aligned to board member role responsibility. The following priorities were identified by one of the newly elected board members as key objectives for a board member training workshop in this community:

to learn more how to run a school, local school board; not how to run a school, but how to run the local school board; how to get it organised; how to act when there's a big complaint comes; how to work with the parents; how to work with the children; how to work with the staff, with their local staff, your principal. And all these they have to know, pretty well have to know. I had that experience; I've been in through that workshop before, and that's what we did. . . . And that's what they teach you. They don't teach you to be a big boss; you've got to be always a humble person when you're working for your local school board. So that's what all they teach you, is how to handle things when there's a problem arises, how to handle it.

For one board member, the experience of attending the Corporate Board meeting and interacting with other board members was a valued learning experience:

I learn a lot from other people. Well, for one thing, I learn the differences [between the communities]. There's a difference in what's good for, say, Desmarais may not be good for Atikameg. I learned that. At one time I used to think that more or less the world was the same anywhere you went, but I learned the differences just travelling around.

The value of interacting with local school community board members at the Corporate Board level was echoed by another board member who stated: "Yes, it's very interesting. You meet a lot of people, you meet a lot of good friends, and you also have a lot of good ideas how to run your school and how they work."

## Understandings and Experiences of Local and Global Forces

### Affecting Atikameg-Sovereign L.S.B.C. Development

The development of L.S.B.C. trusteeship in the Atikameg-Sovereign community is penetrated by a range of interactive forces which emanate from both within and beyond the community. A number of interviewees identified and discussed such influences.

#### Community Apathy

One L.S.B.C. member identified apathetic community attitudes as a force which influenced L.S.B.C. development and discussed possible reasons for community disinterest:

There is no money, . . . and yet there seems to be money because of the cars and snowmobiles in driveways, . . . and people run to High Prairie every other night to play bingo. . . . But most people are on welfare . . . and seem to accept that as a way of life.

According to one interviewee, one of the difficulties confronting the Atikameg-Sovereign L.S.B.C. is the challenge of interacting with the community on a regular basis. As indicated in the following claim, a perceived need for interaction is often precipitated by a crisis in the community:

I think one of the biggest problems we find is getting people involved, people, parents. That is one real hard thing. And sometimes we still get things rolling, but then I start to feel, is this what people want? They don't come and see us unless there's struggle. They don't come and tell us, "You're doing a good job" if we are. So it's always this puzzle, whether we are doing the right thing or not, because we can't satisfy anybody anyway.

The reason suggested by one board member for this apathetic attitude towards the symbol of education in the community (the L.S.B.C.) was associated with past experiences such as the residential schools and the effect on their lives:

I think that's the reason why people don't come out to meetings, like school board meetings, but they're always welcome to come, even just to sit there and listen. . . . If they [had the local board meeting] somewhere else, maybe in the band hall instead of the school, because we always have

it at the school; every board meeting is at the school. And that's the place where people don't come. Maybe if they have it in the band hall or where they'll feel more [comfortable], maybe they'll [come to meetings].

Another perception was that "parents don't come to meetings held at the school because they think it's not their place to be."

According to two respondents, the noninvolvement of the community in L.S.B.C. meetings is, historically, a pattern in this community and is passively accepted as such:

- There's not that much involvement from parents at the meetings; they don't get involved.
- And it's always been like that. I think the ones that are most involved are the ones that sort of got involved with the school through either working or subbing. I think those are the ones that are more involved.

According to one interviewee, the nature of some of the business recently addressed by the L.S.B.C., such as school discipline, is directly related to broader community concerns and is attracting both positive and negative involvement of parents:

I think [the community is] starting to realise that discipline is very, very important. In order to be able to teach kids you've got to have good discipline in the classroom, and sometimes that is what turns off some parents.

They agree that teachers should discipline the children, but when the teachers do [discipline their children], they're right over there ready for a fight. I don't think they really know what they want.

### **Teacher Attitudes**

In the opinion of one board member, teacher attitudes sometimes influence the selection of teachers during recruitment processes, as described in the following comment:

A lot of people that came in here to teach native children had this idea that native children could not learn, or else had to learn in a different way. There are some truths a little bit to that, but then when I was on the big chair for the Corporate Board for three years, and going around interviewing teachers, it proved to me that I was right, because some of



the teachers asked us, "Why are the native children so slow?" You know, they had not even come here. It's probably stories they heard, or I don't know what it is. . . . So when anyone talked *that* way, I guarantee they didn't get a job, because I feel that if anybody is sincere in wanting to teach, I don't think they should look at the colour or the nationality of a child, but that they are going to teach children; they are going to teach. They learn, they've got papers to prove that they're qualified to teach somebody. Therefore, they're going to come here and teach somebody, not change us.

### Fragmented Cultural Values

While it was frequently stated that the Cree language "is still strong in this community," it was suggested by one informant that this may in fact refer mainly to the older generation. Observation in the school suggested to the researcher that the younger generation's Cree was extremely fragmented and was seemingly becoming lost in a language which integrated English and some pidgin. Further, the paraprofessional staff tended to speak in English, which is uncommon in a community where language has been retained as an integral part of the culture.

During a discussion witnessed between the principal of the school and a board member, the principal stated:

It's changing, but I would say still, from what we find, we have to treat it as an ESL [program], so English is second language still, because we have to do a lot more head-start work with English than you might find in a city where it's all English speaking. But [Cree] isn't so strong as it is in some reserves, because when you listen on the playground a lot of kids are using English on the playground now, which is often an indicator. And even in the staff room we notice with the staff that Cree speakers often speak in English amongst themselves, so it is changing, but there's still a lot of work done because it is still their second language.

In the opinion of two respondents, the maintenance of traditional cultural ways is very important in a native community and should be reinforced as an integral part of the school program:

- It needs to be talked about and written about. You know, the children have to know their culture; it is very important. I myself, being a native, I have never lost my language; I have always had it. [But] I'm not a very fluent Cree speaker. . . . They are very important, and I think they should be worked into education so that it's written and then

it's taught to our native children, and then it lives on. That needs to be done. [The Elders] could talk to the kids. They could come into the classroom a little more often. If they would just come in and show the students that they are interested in their education, you know, the children will listen to them because that's their own people talking to them.

- I think parents want their children to stay healthy, and they want them to learn to read and write, plus they want them to learn our ways. They want them to learn about hunting and fishing and all these things, and beading; you know, our culture. And some of it is coming back, because we were losing it. . . . They want them to read and write, . . . but some of them even take them out of school to take them to the trapline, so I do know that their actions are saying they want to know the culture.

According to one respondent, such a reinforcement of cultural identity is an important incentive for educational achievement: "Well, many times you hear, 'I'm proud to be a: Indian.' You hear that all over." At this point in the interview the respondent drew a circle with his finger on the table and explained:

Native people like to work together within that circle, so that's the tradition I guess they have, and we still have that tradition. Make a circle and work together; that means working together closely. . . . So if Indians are proud of themselves, they want to do something too. They want to show that they can do it too. They want to show that they can teach or be doctors. They want to show that if they really try, they can do it. That's why native people are interested in education; that's why they're really into it, to try to get the [best] education.

However, it was the experience of one board member that it was often difficult to reconcile the cultural priorities with expectations and values of the wider society, as explained in this comment:

I think the important thing is to be able to live my cultural way and make everybody happy in my house. I still dream of my log house, dream of the kind of house I grew up in. And in the first house I grew up in that I remember, . . . it was a little shack, perhaps about up to that post there, maybe about eighteen by sixteen, if you were measuring; and it had no floor, just a mud floor, and a mud roof about that thick. And warm in the winter, cosy like a little den, and real cool in the summer. Things like this to me mean happiness, but then when you start trying to compete with a dominant society, they require—I used to be at meetings, "Oh, you've got to have a house. It's healthy." You know, we were always healthy. All of a sudden they were creating all kinds of things, giving us reasons why we have to live like the white people, and I don't think it's right.

The potential benefits of the appointment of native teachers to Atikameg were explored by one board member, who mused:

We would like to see all native teachers in this school, a native to teach his/her own [people], because native people know more about the backgrounds or the way native people operate, and I think it's an advantage, instead of, if you bring in another person that's not native. It's kind of difficult to either adjust to her or him or the teacher adjust to them.

An example of the influence of native leadership in the community was provided by one interviewee, who observed that one board member was a good model for young people in the community:

Like [one board member], because he was born here, raised here, and went to school in this school, and he finished school here, and then he took his high school in Edmonton. And he had the experience, so he wants the other children to go into that. . . . To look at him and say, "I could do that too."

While parents expressed aspirations for their children, student attitudes often discouraged progress in this area, as suggested in the following comment:

Parents want their children to finish school and want to see their children become something, like maybe a teacher or a doctor or whatever they can finish their school with. But parents put out a lot of thinking, too, for their children. But once they get to eighteen years old, or even sixteen years old, it's pretty hard to talk to your child and try to convince him or her to have the proper education.

One trustee suggested that attitudes and values pertinent to education such as those previously described were often transferred from one generation to another generation:

That's the main concern in this community, is that parents want to get their children educated. But I said, when you're full grown you can't do much. When they're eighteen your child will say to you, "Well, Dad, I'm eighteen years old. Don't tell me what to do." I've been a dad myself. When I turned to eighteen or sixteen, well, I said to my dad, "Don't tell me what to do. I'm on my own now." So then what do you do?

The opinion expressed by one respondent was that the attitude of younger people in the community concerning further education was "very poor":

I don't think there's too many that ever think about it, although there is a little more that have been talking about it. Like in the groups, . . . they talk about these things, but most of them, I don't know if it's they don't get the encouragement, or else they've been earmarked with this "You'll never do it" thing.

This presented a difficult dilemma for the L.S.B.C. in terms of intervention and action, as claimed by one interviewee:

I don't think anybody—this is my belief; I don't know, maybe you think I'm crazy, but if they haven't been taught at home from the time they're small to be independent and ambitious, I don't think anybody can do anything. Unless these children had that encouragement from their parents and grew up with it, there's nothing we can do. We can try; we can talk till we're blue in the face, but we can't guarantee we're going to get any results.

A further factor influencing attitudes regarding education was related to the experiences of people who are parents of school-age children today:

What I saw was kids leaving here and going into other schools, rural schools [to do their Grade Nine]. Then they'd come back in more or less defeat because when they'd get over there and they'd get tested, they were always two or three years behind. They're supposed to be in Grade Nine when they leave here, but then when they test them over there for some reason, one reason or another—mostly I think was the language skills—they'd put them back, and a lot of these children wouldn't take that. "I am in this grade, so I want to stay in this grade." So they'd all come home in defeat. But we had no say. When I worked at the school finally in 1970, . . . I saw doors slammed in parents' faces that wanted to come and discuss some issues with their children. We had no say at all in what happened in the school.

In the words of one respondent, "The teacher assistants from the school community [Atikameg-Sovereign] . . . and native professionals" maintain a fragile cultural link between the school board and the school community.

### **Community Factions, Distractions, and Politics**

The influence of local politics in this community was recognised by a majority of board members interviewed. According to one participant: "There's so much more influences that you have to fight against, and everybody's got to kind of pull together . . . *now*, not when it's too late."

One board member cited an example of her understanding of how community politics affect board member interactions:

There's a lot of times I'll bring up things that I don't agree with, and they don't back me up, but yet, when we're sitting like this [one to one], they agree with me. . . . And sometimes it's not agreeing with me. They're the ones that bring it up, so we say, "Let's talk about it." Well, next meeting we'll talk about it, and then I find myself blabbing away all alone. Where's my partner?

The reason suspected by one interviewee for this action of supporting a person privately but not publicly was related to

a fear of the rest of the people, I suppose. You know, deep down I think most people want progress, but on the outside they don't; they want to pretend they're satisfied with what's happening. They'd rather just sit still and let things happen instead of trying to make things happen that they want to happen. I don't know if you're getting me, . . . but . . . I will not sit still until I see things happening that I want to see happen.

Other trustees mentioned another difficulty encountered by board members during their efforts to represent the community. The nature of this problem is explicated in the following excerpt:

It's hard to work in the community for the community, because you can't please everybody. . . . You please some; then others get back at you. . . . I think that's the problem . . . in native communities. . . . That's what we see as the most hindrance, I think.

The opinion of one experienced L.S.B.C. member was that community aspirations and priorities were currently skewed by community distractions:

The distractions—I could tell you about the distractions, and from there you would know the challenges. There's so many distractions coming in. . . . There's drugs now, the alcohol, the corruption as leaders—leadership corruption! . . . Chief and Council, they figure they get into office just to spend the money that belongs to all the band members. Oh, yes. So I think it happens just about in every reserve, but a lot of people take it for granted that that's how it's supposed to be, but I know that's not how it's supposed to be, because when you're entrusted with people's money, you should work accordingly. But I think my priorities, one of the reasons why I would like my children to be educated is, there again, to be able to see the difference of being a leader. It's not just to go in there and spend the money; it's to go in there and see if they can work, and do something for the people that they're representing. That would be my number one priority.

### Cultural Change

The influence of change was noted by many of the board members interviewed. In the words of one participant, "Everything is different . . . because everything is changing year after year . . . because we're living in this world and everything's changing."

According to one interviewee in this study, one of the most significant changes evident in this community is related to patterns of social interaction between people:

People don't visit each other any more, unless you see them at the Band Office, Health Centre, or store. I think that's the only time you get to see the other people. . . . That's a thing that has changed in our community, because years ago, I remember, you'd take time to go visit, because I remember when my mom was still living and able to walk, we used to go visit. . . . Maybe if they did [now] they'd be more together, I think. You know, pull together, and I think things would work out better.

The view of one informant suggested that the community 'focus' had moved to High Prairie:

People don't tend to talk much or share a lot about their experiences—no social networks in the community, but [tend to] get up in the morning, . . . a few go to work, . . . come home, . . . go off to High Prairie for bingo, come back, go to bed, . . . and the cyclical pattern continues.

It was suggested by one informant that one of the reasons for an apparent fragmentation of community social interaction could be associated with the fact that the community is currently divided, mainly by religion. The social dynamics

that had come into play following the emergence of the different religious groups [fundamentalist Christian, Anglican, and Catholic] are seen as perhaps being also very divisive. And perhaps while the elders in the community are certainly out there, they are not considered by the emerging fundamentalist group as important people because of the fact that they're described these days as medicine men; therefore, the elders in this community certainly have a presence, but, if you like, it's a presence that is more or less behind closed doors and therefore not often seen or heard of but, nevertheless, obviously has an impact on what happens in the day-to-day life of the community.

Although the subject of the influence of religion on this community was not pursued in depth, the comment of one other interviewee suggested a challenge in this area:

And I'd say there's a lot of Christians on this reserve too. You'd be surprised, if you walked around and walked to a home, and there's a Christian home in there, which is good. I don't mind. I'm a Christian myself, and there's a lot of things that are happening, but you just have to live with it.

The other significant change confronting this community is allegedly related to the emergence of a new and powerful identity in native communities; namely, the educated native, "the people who go off and get a degree or two and who come back to communities and who, in fact, challenge the Elders' way of doing things." It was contended by one interviewee that these people often gain respect from the community because of their educated status—and because of their exposure to the wider society, they often exercise a perceptive balance in the ideas that they bring back to the community. However, having absorbed a lot of the white culture, it is often difficult for them to manage the pressures of communities. "They are claimed by relatives and friends, and the position of power is certainly manipulated and, I guess, violated to some degree. . . . They are often not their own person, and particularly as a leader they are not their own person."

According to one board member, changes associated with the developments in education both perplexed and challenged him:

Me, I've got no education. I think I went as far as Grade Eight, but at that time in my school days, it was easier; the books were easier, the math was easier, the reading was easier. But this generation we're on now, the books are a little bit harder and more work. At my time, in my days, there was hardly any work, and we just passed year after year. Yes, there was nothing much to do, but this new generation, there's lots to do. There's computers, and there's more work on paper work and higher words and a lot of work. That's why my education doesn't fit into this education today, because mine was easier and theirs is harder. . . . Without education you cannot work in the office. It's getting harder. The first thing they ask you is, "What education do you have?" And if you say, "Grade Five," well, "Sorry, we don't have any work for Grade Five. You've got to be Twelve, and you've got to have a degree and you've got to have a diploma. Then we'll put you to work." That's why education is important today, for both native and white people and any color of people, not only white and not only native people, but any kind of people in this entire world. It's a key thing; it's a very key thing, and I'd like to see everybody get an education. I know about education, because I experienced that.

### **Delimited Horizons**

It was stated by one informant that a number of community members have developed a relatively insular outlook to life and what is possible for them: "Very, very few seem to have a vision of anything beyond the community." Board members interviewed spoke variously about regular visits to High Prairie and to points in southern Alberta, and one trustee described the International Aboriginal Conference he attended in Vancouver:

[We talked and shared ideas.] And they like to hear you too. You've got to have something for them too, because they have ideas of their own. But to look at it across the board as native people, they pretty well have the same feeling and the same idea about education for their children. It's almost the same across the country just for the native people, because them too, they want to get education because education is important today, it really is.

According to school staff in this community, the children do not travel very much. Most children have been to High Prairie and surrounding towns, but very few have travelled beyond those destinations. A limited number of students participate each year in field trips to comparatively far-flung destinations.

Nonetheless, it was emphasised by one trustee that the community really did seek the benefits of the wider society for their children: "I'm sure they do, but they're taking it at a slow pace." This process, according to another board member, reflects on the efforts and aspirations of L.S.B.C. members:

And it's the same with education. We're trying to find ways of improving education. There could be a lot more done. I know a lot of people try. Like, we have the CEC [Canada Employment Centre] here, adults go to school, and I think the ones that do go to school begin to understand the importance, and they're the ones that started encouraging their children that they should keep going.



### Understandings and Experiences of Corporate Board Structure

To a number of Atikameg-Sovereign L.S.B.C. members, the Corporate Board of Trustees, composed of the elected chairpersons from each community, provides solid governance support for their L.S.B.C. The significance of this support is explained in the following excerpt: "Well, perhaps because the structure was made that way, we kind of take it for granted that unless the Corporate Board makes the final decisions on what we want, that nothing will happen."

This statement was supported by another newly elected board member:

And we got a lot of help from Northland. Northland's been pretty good with us for educating our young people, our young students or children; they've been pretty good with us, and I haven't got any complaints with Northland, with their education, because they try their best.

The ethnic changes in the composition of the Corporate Board and perceptions of representation were described by one board member:

It used to be just straight white people, just white people, and it was people from that office, the Head Office in Peace River. The staff from there used to sit on the board. It used to be just white people, is what I was saying. There was a Mrs. Willier, I think, who was the first native person to get in there. She wasn't a member, too; she was just representing the native people. She sat there. But now they have changed that. Native people were so interested in education, they say, "Hey, let's put our people in as chairmen, and let us run it." . . . They used to be all native people at one time, but now it's getting mixed again, and they don't like that because they say, "Well, we want to run our school. We'll sit there as a native people for chairmen," but it's getting mixed. This year it's quite mixed again; a lot of native people and a lot of white people sit on it. . . . It's not that it's trying to take away something from the white people, but it's that they want to show their children that they can do it. They want to really get involved in education.

While a number of respondents expressed the hope that decision-making authority will ultimately be invested in L.S.B.C.s, the opinion of one board member was that the Atikameg-Sovereign community is not yet ready to assume this responsibility:

When they first formed Northland School Division, their intent was some day that each school would be running their own show. Northland School Division was not meant to live forever. But they tried to decentralise, and I was one of the groups that said, "No, we're not ready yet. Maybe take

another ten years before we are ready. But right now we're not." And a lot of people sometimes want to make this drastic move, as far as I'm concerned, because of personal reasons, personal grudges, and we can't move that way because we have to think of being one big, happy family, but it's been working. Aside from a few misunderstandings, it still works. I think we need to have more people educated so that they understand that part, because that's not our culture; we're learning somebody else's culture, and I think they have to be educated, and to understand why education is so important as part of our lives, because it is today. It wasn't twenty years ago. And until they learn and grasp that, we won't be ready. I can see a lot of problems.

However, the Corporate Board decision to decentralise the delivery of educational services to Area Offices in 1988 was perceived to be a good idea by one elected board member:

Yes, it was a good idea. We see more of our area director, because before they had those directors in each area, the only person they could talk to was the superintendent or the person that looks after that department, like Education or Maintenance or whatever, Payroll, Finance, and Personnel. But the superintendent of the division was the key person, and he has to do the travelling, and at the same time he has to try to do his work in the Head Office. So [the Area Office] was a good idea. We saw more, we could get our work done faster, so if we have a problem we just phone him and [the area superintendent] is here. . . . The area superintendent, yes, it works.

### **'Big Board' Management Strategies**

The understandings of persons interviewed regarding the structure and operations of the Corporate Board varied significantly; but, generally, board members felt that the function of the 'Big Board' appropriately complemented the operations of L.S.B.C.s. The experiences of one interviewee in this Big Board-L.S.B.C. interactive process were described accordingly:

A Big Board means all the chairmen of the twenty-seven schools, I think, right now. Every chairman sits around that table. . . . Well, when you're elected chairman you have a regular meeting once a month, just a regular meeting, but if an emergency meeting comes up, then you have the emergency meeting, and as the chairman you take your recommendations to the Big Board, why your board wants something. [If the L.S.B.C.] want a change or they want to change a policy or they want to do this or they want to ask for more money or their budget is getting low and they need to add something there, or whatever. They [the L.S.B.C.] give you the recommendations, and you take that to the Big Board, where all the

chairmen meet, . . . and that's when they bring their recommendations. The Big Board makes the policies too and decides what should be done; and they also look after the big budget, the operating budget, they call it, the whole twenty-seven schools; and they work closely with the superintendent of the division; and they work closely with the staff in Peace River. The Head Office is in Peace River for Northland. And they have a big agenda every time they—they meet once a month, too, once a month. But as I said, a chairman can go there three or four times a month or twice a week or something. If something comes up and they have to decide on it, then they call for the chairmen, so the key people are the chairmen on that Big Board. . . . The chairperson, he works for the whole community. He's the key person of this community. If the parents want something or the Band Council, they give it to the local school board, and the local school board recommends to take it to the Big Board. So it all works in life.

The challenging process aligned to the Corporate Board's responsibility to manage business items and recommendations submitted by 25 diverse communities was discussed by two interviewees, who believed that this process was assisted by 'committee' organisation and structure:

- We send our minutes ahead of time. Then they review. There's a Review Committee, because there's different committees in our Big Board. There's one for the Finance Committee, Review Committee, Maintenance Committee, Staff Committee; there's I don't know how many. There's different kinds, different committees. But all those committees are all the chairmen.
- See, all the chairmen of the twenty-five schools. There might be sometimes five to a committee. Once in a while they get somebody from the staff; usually they do. There's one man there looks after finance in Head Office. He's in with that committee [Finance]. There's another person that looks after education of the staff from Head Office; he's on that committee [Education]. Just straight chairmen, no, that's not how they run it. It's somebody that looks after that department; he sits with that committee. . . . They make a recommendation that this chairman should sit on that [committee]. They just put in on a board, some names, and say, "Where do you want to be?" Usually they ask you, "Where do you want to be?" You've got a choice, yes, yes, you've got a choice. But then every chairperson or chairman has to sit some place; you cannot be a free man for three years and not participate on a committee. You've got to be on one committee, yes, because you're an elected chairman, and they've got to be there. And when you're elected chairman, you're known in Head Office. The Minister of Education, he knows and he sends you a letter that you have been elected chairman. So a chairman is really a very important person to the community and to the Big Board and to the minister. Your name goes right down to the

minister's office when you're elected chairman, so I'd say it's a pretty high seat for a native person to be a chairman, and we like it. We like the way it works, to sit on a committee.

According to the following respondents, the process of managing Corporate Board business involves "lots of discussion" at the board table, and as observed by one interviewee, "Yes, there are some things they don't agree on, . . . something that another community asks for . . . or [something that] involves money. . . . That's why the chairperson has to be there to explain." However, in the experience of one board member, disagreement among board members at the Corporate Board meeting was not a frequent event: "There was an odd time, I'd say, maybe all the time I was there, there might have been not ten, anyway, times that they disagreed, but they always went through [with decisions that were good for all the communities]." It was emphatically stated by one respondent that "that is why we strongly believe in a recommendation. You don't expect to see it go down the drain or forget about it now; it usually comes out good." However, as one trustee pointed out, outcomes often depend on the nature of the recommendations submitted by the L.S.B.C.:

We'll make a motion that these are the things we want, the sort of things we want, and what happens, it goes to the Corporate Board, and the Corporate Board will discuss it; and then if it says *money*, we need that many dollars for whatever, then it goes into the Financial Committee, and the Financial Committee deal with it, then bring it back to the Corporate Board, and they may say, "Yes, we have the money for it" or "No, we don't, but we will include it in the next year's budget."

Sometimes recommendations requiring finance are subjected to inevitable delay in processing, as expressed by one respondent:

Well, I think we've learned now. If I wanted a new program now, I'm not going to expect it, say, till September, but I could be started working on it now. Yes, that's the new budget, because by the middle of the year you know there's no money for a new program. For a small thing there might be money, because there is a surplus that they have, they would use if it's something small and important.

### Policy Development

According to one participant, some specific broad Corporate Board policy guidelines allow flexibility for adaptation at the L.S.B.C. level:

But there are some decisions that are not actually made for the whole [division]. There are some decisions that are made saying it's up to each individual school community to make their policies on different things such as a smoking policy, discipline policy; now it's this busing, field-trip policy. There are certain things that each school has their own authority to change or make whatever [within broad Corporate Board policy].

According to one interviewee, other policies formulated by the Corporate Board are applicable to all school communities in the division: "Well, the curriculum, for instance, that's a given. It must be implemented by all school communities."

In the opinion of one board member, the Corporate Board adopts a collaborative approach to the task of addressing the respective needs and recommendations submitted by L.S.B.C.s across Northland School Division. As one board member understands it, the following process is adopted:

If I took a recommendation from here, they really help; they really put out a lot of thinking for that recommendation to go through. They really work together, is what I'm trying to say, the native people. They really want to get something going for every community. If it's for Gift Lake or if it's for Loon Lake or Peerless Lake or somebody, they all grab that idea; they all work together, they work into it, and they want to see their goal; they want to see it done right now, right away, and work on it. They don't say, "Well, Whitefish, well, I'm not from Whitefish; I don't want to help you." No, they don't say that. They were directed to discuss it with you and discuss with the other board, and then they work together. Any community, [within] twenty-seven schools that make a recommendation, they all jump; they all try to have one good idea, good thing out of it. Work it out, the way it should be. They don't separate; they don't pull away or anything. They just want to get it started, get it going [and work together].

One of the reasons for this approach, according to one trustee, is that Corporate Board members share a common goal; namely, to achieve the best possible education for their children.

Since I've been working with these twenty-seven communities or twenty-four, something like that, and everybody that I work with as a committee, the Big Board, the local school board pretty well looks at education at the same level, same level all the time, same level. But the key thing is that

they want their kids to be educated, properly educated. Many times I hear chairmen say, "Well, I want those kids to be properly educated." Even in big meetings they've brought that up.

Although the Atikameg-Sovereign local school board members interviewed were supportive of the governance arrangements inherent in the current structure of the Corporate Board, the optimum desire expressed by some trustees is the realisation of their own community-controlled school:

We'd like to see it come one day, some day, we'd like to, because, to tell you the truth, I think native people really want to run their own school and educate their own people. I think that's the future they're looking at, although it might take time, but eventually I think that's what they want to do. Like this self-government: People want to do their own thing, and I think that's why they're looking at more education too. That's why I'd like to see more native people become teachers and principals, and that's why we[d like to] run the school ourselves.

Although it was felt by a number of board members interviewed that "we are not quite ready," there is a detectable sense of "we're working towards it." As explained by one interviewee, there is a recognition that preparation is necessary if the aspiration of a community-controlled school is to be realised:

Well, first, we don't have the qualified people for it; we've got to train them. They've got to reach to that degree that they're ready to teach their own native people, and once that happens, then I think they're almost ready to grab and educate their own children. I'm not saying that white men are poor educators, I'm not saying that. They *are* good educators, but it would be nice to see native people teaching native students, as far as I can see, anyway. . . . I think if a native teacher teaches native students, a student gets to understand [better].

### **Understandings and Experiences of Atikameg-Sovereign**

#### **L.S.B.C. Organisation and Practice**

In 1992 the community elected five new members to the seven-member L.S.B.C. in one of the most competitive elections ever held in the community.

What are the understandings of local school board members in Atikameg about the way they organise themselves to make a difference to education in their community?

### Struggles to Achieve a Meeting Quorum

One respondent described the early meetings of the newly elected board:

The first meeting was the financial situation, which is okay because they're learning. As long as they don't get in too deep and start dreaming that there's some corruptness going on, because some of them will ask these funny questions. But otherwise, it's been pretty good. There are a couple there that like to give the teachers a hard time, and this is where I don't like missing meetings for that reason, because I don't think teachers deserve to be given a hard time. I don't mind teachers being talked to, but we're not administrators, and, see, this is where it's hard for them to understand the difference: A committee is not an administrator; we are politicians to try and create a good education, and that's what we should work on. So I had to tell them [about our role]. In fact, we're going to have a workshop, hopefully. I asked Lawrence [the area superintendent] to see if he could get one of our ASTA lawyers to come and have a talk with people and put them in their place. . . . They need to be told the roles of a committee member, the legal rules.

Although the researcher visited this community for four periods of time between February and May 1993, and arranged visits to coincide with the scheduled dates of L.S.B.C. meetings, on each occasion the meeting was cancelled due to the unexpected absence of leaders from the community attending to urgent business elsewhere. On one occasion we arrived at the school for a L.S.B.C. meeting and waited with some members of the local board for an hour until a phone call conveyed the information that neither the chairperson nor the deputy chair was able to attend the meeting that night. The meeting was abandoned due to the lack of a quorum. This was the third consecutive cancellation of the regular school board meeting during my visits to the community. Some implications of the cancellation of meetings were explored by one respondent:

Of course, one of the [problems associated] with this was an administrative difficulty because the Area Superintendent has had business to discuss with the local board and to get approval on personnel matters, such as the approval of the principal's evaluation or not, which was conducted a month or so ago. And staff members, of course, are waiting to have simple requests for funding approved, and it seems difficult for this particular local school board to get together. Some people indicate that one of the reasons for this is that this is the first time the Chief of Council has also been the chairman of the local school board, and both

particular positions place heavy demands on his time, and in particular necessitate regular excursions to other major centres so that in fact he is, in the opinion of some people, "very rarely in the community."

However, cancellation of meetings was not unduly surprising to one board member, who suggested that it usually took a while for a new board to establish a working relationship:

Sometimes it's hard to get a meeting going. As a new board, we are trying to figure out things, the way that we would like to see our local school board work, and also how our local school works. So what I'm trying to really say is that we're still in a learning stage, because we've got the early part of the year and we've got to sit here for three years, so when things happen like that, the first year will be a little bit of change; the second year will be more; and the third year, then it will look better than the first year. So there will be changes, not to make rules or by laws or anything, but as a school board they're talking about really working together and really participating in school here, our local school, and really supporting our students and our teachers, and everybody's happy with the staff, so I think by the time the year ends, it will look better than at the beginning.

However, as considered by one respondent, the fact that the chairman of the L.S.B.C. is also the Chief of Council and travels extensively may negatively influence the operations and the effectiveness of the L.S.B.C. The following excerpt from an interview describes one board member's fears:

... the first time that happened. Yes, that's the first time that we had a Chief and an elected chairman for the local school board. We had councillors before sitting on the local school board, because at that time the local school board wanted one councillor all the time to sit as a school board. . . . Yes, representative from the Council. . . . From my experience as a local school board and all the experience I had all these past years, I think it's going to be pretty hard, because as chairperson, as the chairperson for many years, I sometimes had a lot of things to do for the school and also for the Big Board, and sometimes they put you to travel lots. Sometimes not, but sometimes they do; mostly they do. Every month you've got to be in Peace River, or maybe two or three times regular meetings, and you might have to go to a conference. I don't know about this year now, about having this Chief as a chairperson. I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know if the Chief's going to have time, because I sit on the Council too. The last two years I was a councillor in Council. There's a lot of work there and a lot of pressure. . . . Oh, [the chief] has got lots of travelling to do. . . . Yes, it is a big job. It is if you want to look at it the right way for the benefit of the children. It is something to do. To be a Chief and to be a chairperson, it might be difficult sometimes to work things out. I guess it can work out



if he works real hard on it, but sometimes [he is] three or four times out of the office a week. It's quite a lot. I don't know what he's going to do, but I'm going to talk to him, anyway.

According to one experienced board member, the significant change in membership of the L.S.B.C. is influencing the development of board cohesion and effectiveness:

This [board] is a big change from the last board. And all I've been doing so far is fighting with the committee: "Hey, look, we're not here to fight. We're not here to fight. Let's concentrate on some priorities, and our priority is our children, not to satisfy our own egos." Even the chairman, who's now the chief, kind of forgot he was on a school-committee meeting, and I had to remind him to take off his chief hat. I'm afraid it might get the two jobs mixed up; I'm afraid that's what it might do. I don't know. Time will tell. But this is one of the unique things I like about being on the committee, because we can let our chairman go at our pleasure; we don't have to have a reason, which is good, because the Chief and Council now, they're bound for two years because we elected them in. No matter what they do, aside from killing somebody, there's nothing we can do. But with this committee now, even the Corporate Board chairman, he can be let go at the pleasure of the rest.

However, as further explained by this participant, elected school board representatives are not usually dismissed:

It has never happened, not in the Big Board. With superintendents it has. It's the same with superintendents, where at the pleasure of the board they can let them go without explaining why. It's ironic, but sometimes it's kind of a good thing to have too.

### **A Collaborative Approach to Problem Solving**

You know how some people, when they're in a committee, they want to fight, and this is something that I always told my members when I was on the chair, "We're not here to be weapons for the community; we're here to be tools so that we can kind of organise a better education system for our children," and that's what I worked on, that's what I worked on. It was hard; it was really hard.

Although it was claimed by one participant that meetings were often places where people did not all agree with one another, difficulties confronting the Atikameg L.S.B.C. were usually addressed amicably by all concerned, according to another respondent:

We have it [people who don't agree] in the local board too, and we have lots of that too in the Big Board. It's pretty well all over, though; any meetings, somebody going up, "We want one thing," and somebody won't agree on one thing, and the other one won't agree on it, and they start discussing from there. Usually, when things happen like that in our local school board, it usually ends up in a good way. They discuss it and they work it out. The same with the Big Board in Peace River, if somebody doesn't like something. There's always somebody [who provides] maybe a little bit different wording [to solve a problem]. They usually come out with a good idea. When all twenty-seven minds work together on one thing, it's bound to come out good.

The understanding of one local school board member was that mediation of conflict between the school and parents is addressed in the same manner:

They had a meeting. They talk about it. They had a nice talk with the parents, they had a nice talk with the principal, and they tried to come out with a good idea. They don't just go there and start raising trouble or argument; no, they don't. They want to stay away from the argument. They just want to work it out some more so they can discuss it. The best thing is to sit down with the parent and discuss that with them, but sometimes, again, the parent doesn't want to talk with seven board members for it. It's best that maybe the chairman or somebody that's related to him or her go and talk to that individual and sit down like we did and discuss it, and then [bring] it to the local board meeting. So, really, they try to work it out the way it should be [done].

If and when the problems cannot be resolved at the local level, the approach adopted by the Atikameg L.S.B.C. is to seek external assistance from Northland School Division. This was described by one participant in the following words:

When that happens [the problem is not solved], they usually, they call it "table" it. Well, we'll table that item, and we'll discuss it again next meeting. Or if they think it's a big problem, then they'll say, "Well, we have to have a chairman, the Big Board chairman, here, the superintendent, and the local school board and the principal, and then we'll try to work something out." They go with their problems to the Big Board too; yes, they do. Yes, the chairman takes it, yes, or invites them to our next meeting. Our area superintendent, they invite him to the meeting. And they came out, yes; the chairman of the Big Board came out and the superintendent, they came out. They love coming out, travel to a community. So that's how they work things out. So everything works within the board. Not very many things go out to the minister.

According to one respondent, if a parent has a complaint about the school, the parent usually approaches a board member, in the first instance:

That happens many times, and then when that happens we wait till the board meeting, and we bring it up and we discuss it as a group, as a board. Or even the principal: If the principal had somebody come up here and complaining or talking about his children or her children, and the principal brought it up in a meeting, then we'd discuss it from there. Or if it's so important, then we call for the parent to come over, or we just can go and talk to him individually. Everything goes through the board, everything.

As indicated by one respondent, the principal consults with the local school board about emergent parental concerns because "usually the principal knows first, and usually the principal tries to get to the board first, too. So it works all in order." However, although parents often approach individual board members with a problem in the first instance, one interviewee emphasised the inherent dangers in individual trustees handling problems in isolation from the L.S.B.C. This is explained in the following excerpt:

Plus, if I say, "Well, you come," then, "Well, okay, I'll help you, I'm a Big Board, I'm a big man and I'm a big shot, and I'll go and help you. I'll go and talk to that person myself, and never mind about the board." That won't work; it won't work. All you're causing is problems, more problems, and you might get yourself into trouble because that has to come back to the board now, and the board will say to you, "Well, how come, Tommy, you never let us know? You go there by your own. You should have let us know. Maybe we can work it out, something different." See, you've got to watch that all the time as a board.

Outcomes of board members acting independently from the L.S.B.C. when approached by parents individually were considered by other participants. Often parents seek an answer from an individual member of the board when it is important that the matter be dealt with at a board meeting. As explained by one board member:

If it's an emergency, then we call for an emergency meeting. We try to help the best we can as an elected school board. But then again, we don't want to overstep our chairman, our principal. For myself, if somebody comes to me at my house and they said this and they said that, they had a problem, and "Is there anything you can help me?" maybe a complaint or something, then what I have to say is that, "Well, I heard you; I'll do the best I can. I'll take it down to the board or I'll call for an emergency board meeting, and we'll try to help you as a group." We always try to help as a group, as a local school board, as a group.

However, input from two members of the board suggested that as representatives of the community, trustees had an individual responsibility to support their constituents:

- When they have problems, too, that's when they ask you what they should do and all that, and if you can speak up for them, . . . but we've been told different [by the board].
- I don't know, but I think, because it's the people that vote you in, I don't see why you can't speak up for them. That's my feeling. We had an experience about that. We were told not until the person is there, so you can sort of back him up. . . . But I tried to bring in a concern for a parent, and she wasn't at the meeting.

### **Board-School Interface**

Board members interviewed variously described a high level of L.S.B.C. and community involvement in the school. However, the following individual comments by respondents suggest that involvement is qualified by understandings of protocol and by adherence to policy guidelines:

- Chief and Council and a lot of parents get involved. Everybody wants to get involved, but the thing is that they have to come to school and talk to the teachers. [Board members] come to the school if they are called. But if they want to walk around and look around, nothing wrong with that. . . . But again, the local school board doesn't want to say they've got more power, walk in here and just start doing this; no, they don't do that.
- And besides, parents put a lot of their trust in the teachers. . . . They really do trust the staff.
- It's the teacher's job to teach their children and they [the parents] want to leave them to do it, so they don't want to come into the school to help.
- They [board members] respect the school, they respect the staff, and they respect the principal. They don't walk in here and just start looking into files or walk into school, or just because I'm a board [member] I can do that; no, they don't work like that. They work the way it should work. They've got policies too. We've got our own policies; we've got our own things to do as a local school board; it's written down. We've got to follow that. We cannot overstep that policy. Our manual, what the local school board's all about, it's all written down there. Yes, we keep within that policy, and we follow it almost straightforward.

To one board member, the responsibility of working to encourage students in educational pursuits was an important role:

The local school board has to do a lot of encouragement of the students and work with them closely, show them that they're interested, show them that they want them to do [well], and also get involved with them more, try to show something or try to have an idea or try to come up with something that really that they'd be interested in about education; really put a lot of your own strength and work with them and talk with them and encourage them. And once they see it, they'll always remember that.

The perspective of one respondent was that the L.S.B.C. is actively involved in school planning procedures: "The school does have their organisational plans that they want to [implement], so the board has to okay that too. The board often asks questions about this, and last time there was lots of discussion." Further, as indicated by one trustee, the school board recognises school achievement and special occasions:

When good things are happening at the school, we [board members] let them know. We have awards at the end of the year, in December, just before Christmas, and at the end of the year where we make sure they know that we know they've done a good job. Some [board members] go into the school passing out report cards.

On Christmas Day and Christmas holidays, they buy candy and they put money for awards and they put money for good attendance, and really, any councillor that sits in there really puts a lot of effort for the school. They put some money; they don't just say, "I like the school, I like the way it runs."

As representatives on the Personnel Committee, some of the L.S.B.C. members have been involved with staffing-related matters. For one board member the recruitment of teachers provided an opportunity to emphasise the perceived responsibilities of teachers in the community:

There's one question I always ask the teachers when I'm interviewing. Maybe they're happy now I'm not the interviewing committee, because I've been on the Personnel Committee for a number of years. But one of the things I always ask them is, "Are you willing to go into the community and visit the parents?" They don't have to start being palsy-walsy, but to go and visit them and tell them the progress of the students, whatever, kind of get a good working relationship, because when you have a child in the middle like that, you obviously have to be able to have a good relationship in order to do something with this child. And it took a long time for some of the teachers to grasp that, and I say, "If you can't

convince the parents," I said, "there's no way you'll ever convince that child." And some do. I shouldn't say they don't all [visit parents], but a lot of them don't.

According to one interviewee, the other important responsibility for local school board members is to induct teachers into the 'system' and particularly into an isolated community:

Of course [we] did a lot of talking with the teachers, trying to get them into a new system. Like, they are now going to be teaching native children; not to try and change them, but to teach them. And then [to recognise that] every child goes to school with a gift they were born with or else developed while they're in their home at an early age, and not to kill that when they go into the school in exchange for whatever they're going to teach them. That's another thing I didn't like. Even today it's happening.

As described in the following comment, members of the L.S.B.C. have exercised an important role in advocating a need for paraprofessional staff in the school:

Well, the first thing we did was, we started fighting for paraprofessionals, native-speaking people that could help the teachers, because, oh, you wouldn't believe it! I don't want to tell the story here, the way that the poor kids that only spoke Cree would walk into that school, and one time I watched the teachers—I was already a counsellor aide—and kids walking in, they were already classifying this child: "That one will never make it. That one will make it." And I watched this happening; it's not something I heard. And, boy, I used to fight, I used to fight for all I'm worth with the teachers.

However, one trustee suggested that talking to teachers helped to build a bridge between the school and the home:

Well, the school board could sit with the teachers. There's—what do you call that?—orientation in the fall. We do quite a bit [of that]; in fact, in the last two years. . . . [We] talked about the responsibilities that children have at home, the responsibilities they have in the school, and then actually the responsibilities they have in general for the community or wherever they . . . grow up.

However, the following comment by one participant indicates that some board members also considered community challenges from the perspective of teachers:

The teachers are hired to teach our children what they've learned, they're qualified to teach, and as far as I'm concerned, I expect them to do their best and that's it. I know they cannot do more, and I guarantee, I think

they bend backwards trying to do their best because they know what we expect of them. . . . That's what I said in one of my speeches: "A lot of them left their homes," I said, "to come and teach here, and I don't think," I said, "anybody remembers to say thank you."

### Involvement with Parents

Although L.S.B.C. meetings are open to the public and parents are notified of meeting dates, there appears to be little interest demonstrated by attendance at meetings unless there is a problem. As explained by one interviewee, a possible reason for this could be related to specific parental experiences of education:

And the parents, if they have concerns they can bring them up at the board meetings, and from there on they can try and work something out. . . . Although they're welcome and notes are sent out—anybody can come—they don't really attend. Maybe if they did, they'd understand more of what's going on in the school. Because I remember years ago when we went to school, my mom never came here for anything, because I think it's brought up from the residential school, and I think that's where this came out from, because once you're in there, you don't get out.

This understanding of nonattendance at L.S.B.C. meetings was reinforced in the comments of another respondent:

Sometimes it's difficult to get the parents coming to the meetings; sometimes it's very difficult, because when things happen . . . and things [get] difficult, is that the parents and the local people, when they're told if they can make it to the meeting, they'd rather [stay] amongst themselves. If you tell parents to make any recommendations, you'll have lots of them. But I don't really know why they're not coming to the meeting. It's been like that since it started, it's been like that. Sometimes a few turned out; sometimes not. Mostly, it's just the local school board and the teachers having a meeting. But if you invited them, they didn't really come to the meeting. But we try one thing too, that we put a meeting right in that reservation, right in the community hall, and it was a good turnout then. . . . They don't feel at home, and they're sort of shy, because a lot of people have got that in their system, sad and shy, . . . because of their own experiences at school. . . . If they'd come out more to the school, even during the week, I think they would be more interested in coming to the school and to the meetings and really participate. But whenever they do come and participate in school, you'd be surprised how things work; it just works nice. They just participate right in there, and they're happy people. It's not that they're mean or they don't like school or they don't like the teachers; it's that I guess they're not just feeling at home, because that's the way native people are. They've got to really feel free, and they've got to feel like home; then they'll be happy. Sometimes that happens to me too when I went out for a meeting or when I go to some

place out in the city. I don't feel at home, I don't feel I fit in there, and I don't want to do anything. I don't want to say anything. I just want to get out of there and go home.

However, the experience of one board member was that parents approached the L.S.B.C. for support when needed. Processes adopted by the council to address emergent issues were described accordingly:

Even the parents, if they want something changed, they'll bring it up. They won't keep it; they've brought it up to the local school board and said, "You're the local school board; you're elected members. You push for it, you push for us, you work for us, and you bring that recommendation into that Big Board meeting for us," and then you have to do it because you have been elected, and you have to do your best to try to work for the local people, local parents, and for the children. You didn't go there, say, to the Big Board, "Well, my recommendation has to go through today. You've got to approve it. I need the answer today because I'm from this community, and I want a big school." You don't do that. You just work it out slowly and discuss on it, and, as I said, eventually it'll come if it's a good idea. Yes, they like to see changes, but we have to hear from the parents what kind of changes they want for their children. Then we make recommendations. Then if we can't get it through the Big Board, if the Big Board somehow stalls it and says, "Well, we'll work on it the next two or three years," then the chairman has to do a little more. Then he has to go to the minister.

Board members felt that it was important for the L.S.B.C. to work with parents in the community. This priority is identified in the following comments:

It is important [to work] with the parents in the community, because they know their child. It's their own child, and they're with them every day, and they have an idea what that child wants to be in the future, and they see that child, what it wants to be in the future. They'll see [that] education will help them . . . in the future. . . . It really helps for a parent to really get involved.

### **Management Strategies**

According to board members interviewed, the L.S.B.C. has been delegated the authority by the Corporate Board to address a number of important issues at the community level. In the opinion of one elected board member:

There's quite a bit, there's quite a bit [that we can do]. But like I say, I'd need the book. There's quite a bit. . . . There is money. Well, the budget, say, Atikameg school budget. We have that right. . . . Anything the teachers want to do, or even buy capital items, it has to go through us,



yes. Field trips. . . . Of course, we have to have money there in place too, but most communities raise a lot of funds, so, providing they have the funds, yes, we do approve them. . . . [The students went] to Newfoundland last year. . . . Most of [the money] was raised by the students themselves. We have a field-trip club. [It] doesn't even have to go through Northland; we don't even need Northland funds for that. We purposely had gone to that club because it can be done in the summer, and then there's so many regulations and everything. I know it's good to be safe, but you don't have to have Northland to do that, and they went. There were quite a few kids that went for two weeks.

The agenda items addressed during a L.S.B.C. meeting often included financial business, as described in the words of one participant:

Moneywise, like, budgets, the local school boards do all their own budgets. Not the big budgets; I'm not talking about that, operating of the school budget. We've never seen that. Just our little local school board budget. We get some [money] from the Corporate Board, yes, we do, but we also get some from the band. The band really participate lots too. They put in a lot of effort on education for the community here and for the school. They put some money too; yes, they do. They gave money. We submit our budget to them, and they approve it for the use of the school. Not for the use of the school board; for the use of the school.

In recent years the L.S.B.C. successfully worked towards the introduction of a hot-lunch program:

However, we did fight for it; we got it, we got it, not because I believed in that one; I don't believe in it. I don't believe in taking, taking, taking. I want to teach my children to be independent. I said, "The government is going to own us," . . . and, oh, did they ever get mad at me! . . . However, we got the hot-lunch program. I even tried to make it so the kids could pay a few cents, even twenty-five cents a lunch. It was teaching them at the same time that they cannot go into the world and forever hold out their hand, that they have to try and give something in exchange. I taught my own that; all my kids are independent.

The understandings of three trustees concerning procedures adopted by the L.S.B.C. in performing the business management function were described as follows:

- . We have a chairperson that runs the meetings, and [it] has to be in order, so when something's in a motion, one of us can move, and then everybody has to agree, and it's got to be written down that way.
- . In a meeting, when you move, you don't have a seconder.

- It used to be the other way around. When somebody moves a motion or something, it used to be you had to have a second. Now I don't know who adopted the new procedure. I don't know how that came about. When I came on, that's the procedure they used when I was there.

The meeting procedure was further explained by another board member:

I only have one vote, and, for instance, if it was very important that we get a motion made, what I had done was get the secretary to type up a sheet with a motion, and they'll bring it to me, so I'll sign it that I made the motion, and then we only need one mover; we don't need a seconder in this unique organisation. Then I'll have to go around and have the rest of the committee members sign it so that it's legal. [Then] that's given to the Corporate Board as a motion.

Although the L.S.B.C. has delegated authority from the Corporate Board to exercise some control over decisions at the local level, the levels of bureaucracy often cause some problems, as described by one local school board member:

Well, [the L.S.B.C.] have quite a bit of power but not all the power, because it's the Corporate Board that make the final decisions. A lot of things are recommendation only. I think they had more power—I don't know how I've said that—when we started I think we had more power than we do today, but it's beginning to come back again because I've been doing a lot of bitching and complaining: "How come all these things?" So more and more it's beginning to come back, but for a while there it was almost worthless as far as I was concerned, because it was like being between a rock and a hard place where the principal, I think, sometimes was quite puzzled as to how far could he go. If the committee says, "Look, you do this," then they would phone Central Office, and maybe Central Office would say, "Hey, you know, you don't do this." So there could be a little war. Not us so much, but there are other communities that have them fighting.

The aspiration of greater control over education in the Atikameg community was expressed by one participant in the following way:

I would like to see a real high-educated leader and run the school just amongst ourselves, have our own principal, have our own teachers. But there again, you have to try to somehow encourage your children, our children, to get to that level. That's why I'm saying education's important. Without education you won't be able to get to that level and you won't be able to see your own people, our own native people, sit in that chair unless if they have that education that a white man has to for them, white people have to. That's why it's important to have to really respect their teacher; although if it's a white person, still, he has the qualification to teach you to become the next principal of your community. That's why I'm saying, never let down a white person, a white teacher. Never say, "He didn't teach me anything. I don't know anything. He

was my teacher." Never say that, but always, always put up in a front place of you, because he's the one that puts you there. . . . If a native student really thinks, "Well, I can do it too," he did it himself or her, then we'd better try. That's the feeling they have. That's what the feeling I used to have, anyway, when I was in school: "I want to be something." If I saw an Indian teacher, I wanted to be like him. That's in the blood of a native people, because native people can be good teachers too, but still, they need the education from the white society. They'll pick up fast too, a native teacher teaching a native student.

### Summary

In the small, isolated treaty-Metis community of Atikameg-Sovereign, four of the seven members of the L.S.B.C. elected in 1992 described a number of challenges confronting the development of L.S.B.C. trusteeship. While a number of interviewees had been involved in education for extensive periods of time, it was clear that change forces pervaded the process of the 1992 election. After what was described as years of mediocre community interest in the L.S.B.C. function, it appeared to some board members that "almost half the community ran for election." In fact, 22 candidates competed for election to the seven L.S.B.C. positions. Although interviewees individually articulated goals associated with the improvement of community education, there was no clear understanding shared by participants of a community-wide mandate for the newly elected L.S.B.C., which offered little membership continuity from the previous L.S.B.C. A significant change was the election of the Chief of the Band Council as the chairman of the L.S.B.C. This was a concern to some board members interviewed, who felt that the separate identity and function of the L.S.B.C. had been compromised. Other frustrations expressed by board members interviewed included the conflicting agendas pursued by some board members, difficulties experienced in getting a quorum for monthly meetings, and lack of a sense of cohesive board member relationships at this developmental stage of the newly elected board. Participants in the study felt that on-the-job experience as board members both in the community and at Corporate Board meetings assisted elected

members to learn role responsibilities, but that needs-focused training programs would assist to develop community-based managerial competence.

Despite the intensive efforts by concerned interviewees to mobilise community members to work collaboratively towards the achievement of shared goals, organisational development in this community appears to be continually thwarted by fragmented cultural values, socioeconomic dynamics, and factional party politics. Nonetheless, board members interviewed expressed a determination to overcome these difficulties in an attempt ultimately to design and manage their own community education system. The major challenge inherent in this objective is the further development of cohesive L.S.B.C. relationships and the involvement of the community in education and training programs.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to discover and describe the understandings and experiences of local school board members about the processes through which local school board trusteeship is developing in three predominantly native communities in Northland School Division. In Chapters 5, 6, and 7 of this report, the understandings and experiences of local school board members were discovered in the stories presented by participants themselves about the community context, the 1992 L.S.B.C. election, local and global forces impacting upon L.S.B.C. development, Corporate Board functions, and L.S.B.C. organisation and practice.

The objective of the first section of this chapter is to present findings of the study through an interpretation of the multiple understandings and experiences of participants presented in the stories documented in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. These rich and voluminous examples of local and more global experiences provided by the respondents generated multiple interconnected themes which are presented as a synopsis of patterns of findings in this section of Chapter 8.

In presenting the findings, (a) commonalities in themes emergent from the understandings and experiences of board members in the three communities are identified, and (b) themes which are unique to specific communities are noted and explored. The findings are described in the form of answers to the research questions which directed the study.

The second section of this chapter is devoted to an analytic discussion of the findings in relation to previous knowledge about the development of local school board governance highlighted in the literature reviewed.

## **Findings**

***What are the understandings and experiences of local school board members about the characteristics which determine the contextual uniqueness of the community?***

**Context-specific realities.** Although the researcher set out to answer this question in isolation from other questions, it was discovered that findings were inextricably linked to understandings and experiences described in answer to other areas of the inquiry. For example, in many instances the respondents' richly described multiple realities about personal experiences of history and community values appeared to shape understandings, attitudes, and experiences described in response to other research questions. Therefore, board member understandings and experiences of context could not be separated from understandings and experiences of the 1992 elections, Corporate Board governance, local and global forces impacting upon local boards, and local board organisation and practice. Consequently, answers to the question related to context are presented as inseparable concepts in the findings to all research questions.

***What are the understandings and experiences of local school board members about the processes associated with their election to the L.S.B.C. in 1992?***

**Winds of change.** A theme which dominated the stories of participants about the 1992 local school board elections in all three communities was the compelling force of *change processes generated in many instances by an increased value placed upon education.* According to respondents, this influenced the 1992 elections, which recorded unparalleled activity in candidacy nomination and in community interest at the polls. Significant changes compared to previous elections were observed in *the elimination of the electoral boundary in Wabasca-Desmarais, a "hotly contested*

*campaign" by Mistassiniy candidates, perceptions of a community mandate for community control of education (Athabasca Delta), and "almost half the community running for election to the school board" in Atikameg. According to a number of respondents, an important outcome of the competitive nature of the 1992 elections was the significant change in each of the newly elected board memberships.*

A majority of candidates for election to the Athabasca Delta, Mistassiniy, and Atikameg-Sovereign Committees said that they were motivated primarily by factors related to *their personal educational experiences and educational aspirations for the community, the need for community-wide representation, increased involvement in educational decision-making processes, and the driving force for community control of their respective education systems.* However, two board members, representing Mistassiniy and Atikameg communities, expressed the viewpoint that some board members were motivated by self-interest incentives and often sought involvement *"to please their egos," "because they're power seekers," and/or "for other personal reasons."*

The understandings shared by a number of respondents indicated that the factor of *change* also manifested its influence in *the heightened levels of community awareness and expectations* which directed voting preferences and the selective confirmation of seven candidates as newly elected members of the respective community boards. Interviewees in Fort Chipewyan believed that the community voted for candidates with *a good education, achievers with management skills who demonstrated leadership ability and commitment to work towards community control of education, or "a person that can speak to anything brought to their attention and be able to address matters in any meeting."* Similarly, interviewees representing Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. believed that increased community involvement in the electoral process was generated by *the desire for change and better education for their children.* Subsequently, *the personal calibre and reputation of candidates* were

considered before casting a vote: "People are more picky, selective, *because they want change, better school, better control of everything.*" One respondent (Mistassiniy) considered that the community perceived that *particular candidates had personal power*, while another interviewee (Atikameg) suggested that people voted for candidates whom they saw as *weapons for complaints*. Although some board members in each community were uncertain about the degree of the community's understanding of the functional role of the L.S.B.C., a majority of the participants considered that *the community voted for candidates whom they perceived to be a key to more involvement in decision making pertinent to local educational priorities*. The understandings shared by a number of board members indicated that local communities wanted *strong educational leadership* on local committees, people who were prepared to *represent the community by 'bringing out sensitive complaints' in community and Corporate Board forums* (Atikameg-Sovereign), and *vocal people who are prepared to stand up for the rights of what they believe in for the school and liaise effectively between school-community and Corporate Board* (Athabasca Delta). However, the understandings expressed by two respondents (Atikameg-Sovereign, Athabasca Delta) implied that *people voted for their friends, relatives, and clan members regardless of advocacy claims*. One respondent (Atikameg-Sovereign) suggested that *community-education programs were needed to assist the further development of democratic processes*.

A dominant theme projected in the understandings and experiences of Athabasca Delta and Mistassiniy respondents was the need for a truly *democratic representation of the multicultural dimensions of the respective communities*. According to one respondent, an objective of the Athabasca Delta L.S.B.C. was *"to guarantee representation of all the major ethnic groups and not to favour any individual group."* However, another board member (Athabasca Delta) claimed that this objective for democratic representation had not been realised because *"most of them [elected board*



*members] are treaty members, band members on the board. . . . The majority is Cree and Chipewyan.*” The perspective of another participant in the study (Athabasca Delta) was that *“over two hundred voters elected a group of people who would work diplomatically to fairly represent the different segments of the community”* in the pursuit of common goals. The assertion of two members of the Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. was that *the native and nonnative community elected “a mixed board,” basically representative of “half and half,” to represent the vibrant multicultural community.* In Atikameg the understandings and experiences of board members interviewed implied that *the democratic principles of representation were skewed by community-based factions and organisations; and the perceived fusion of Band Council and L.S.B.C. identity, due to the election of the Chief of Council as board chairman.*

Although the experiences of newly elected trustees in learning the role of a board member varied across the three communities, a recurring theme in the stories presented was a recognition of *the need for ongoing individual and collective board member learning and development.* Many of the participants expressed appreciation of the *formal learning assistance provided by Northland School Division* for them to attend *orientation workshops* and to access *policy manuals* and other relevant *documentation packages.* Some interviewees claimed that *attendance at L.S.B.C. meetings and Corporate Board meetings* provided a useful learning experience, while others looked to the *leadership example* of the chairman and other experienced board members as *models of role behaviour.* A number of respondents in each community identified *a need for community-based training programs* which addressed community-specific organisational and management priorities. One respondent (Atikameg) considered that the *personal resources and skills that Elders could bring as part of themselves into a meeting* should be exemplified to promote the learning and development of board members. In Fort Chipewyan two respondents described *the*

*site visits to and observations of other native-controlled education systems as useful learning experiences for Athabasca Delta local school board members.*

***What are the understandings and experiences of local school board members about the local and global forces which impact upon the development of local school board trusteeship?***

**Turbulent times.** Although respondents in each of the three communities visited alluded to the impact of external forces such as *constraints imposed by bureaucracies and declining resource levels*, the greater pressures appeared to emanate from the cultural context of the community itself. A theme common to all communities visited was *the impact of history on the lives of individual interviewees and other members of the community. Childhood experiences of residential mission schools and/or schooling in Edmonton, deprivation of family life, and loss of cultural identity dominated, by varying degrees, individual understandings and experiences shared by participants.* The ‘realities’ of the community context constructed by Atikameg respondents did not transmit an in-depth recognition of the impact of historical fact on their lives, although explanations for this, such as *prolonged absence from the community, reluctance to dwell on a ‘challenging’ past, and a preoccupation with hope for the present and the future*, are forces in themselves which influence attitudes, behaviour, and priorities.

A long history of *community division, conflict, and factions* permeated the stories of respondents, although the perceived impact of this pressure varied by community—arguably relative to context specifics. In Fort Chipewyan *challenges of cultural, governance, economic, religious, and language diversity* allegedly shape individual attitudes and behavioural ‘realities’ of the contextual worlds in which four vibrant ethnic groups work and live. An example of the impact of this

multidimensional diversity on local school board trusteeship development was the fragmented community response to the 1983 legislation which for the first time facilitated a community-elected L.S.B.C. *Undermining of governance processes by groups representing rival factions and a pervasive influence of clan activity generated conflict of interests* which thwarted board management strategies, exacerbated community division, and impeded organisational co-operation and cohesion. The *invisible boundary* which historically separated the culturally diverse communities of Wabasca and Desmarais appeared to intensify hostility between individuals and factions and impeded governance endeavours. As a consequence of this "invisible boundary," candidacy for election to either Wabasca or Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. was restricted (historically) to those parents and community members resident within designated school-boundary areas, irrespective of where their children were enrolled.

An outcome of this community division interpreted by the researcher in data collected via stories, observations, and documents was the impact of *community factions, distractions, and politics*. The continuing presence of four ethnic groups in Fort Chipewyan and the emergence of proactive multicultural influences in the Wabasca-Desmarais community induce *multiple levels of political activity* which necessitate *the ongoing development of ethnic understanding and cultural acceptance*. More recently, the challenge of cultural diversity is being addressed by a local school board *Cultural Committee* (Mistassiniy), amendments to *the wording of the draft mission statement to encompass all cultural identities in the division*, and *Corporate Board discussions of educational-program cultural priorities*. In Atikameg, a dominant treaty-Metis populace appears to be buffeted by disruptive influences of *factions and political activity* at individual and organisational levels. The impacts of these forces are manifested in the *apparent fragmentation of the identity of the L.S.B.C. as an independent organisation separate from the Band Council, and in difficulties encountered in attracting a quorum for board meetings*.

Inherent in the understandings and experiences described by respondents in each of the communities is the proposition that interactive forces emanating from *bureaucratic processes, personal experiences of history, community division, cultural diversity, and community factions and politics* have challenged the essence of cultural values and penetrated community attitudes and aspirations. Further, participants in each community alluded to respective levels of *loss of cultural identity, a diminishing leadership role of Elders*, and socioeconomic distractions such as *changing family values, substance and family abuse, and welfare dependency*.

According to the researcher's interpretation of data collected, L.S.B.C. leadership aspirations aligned to the achievement of *educational objectives are often thwarted by apathetic community attitudes, limited educational vision, and distorted educational values*. For example, while *the value of education* is widely promulgated, specific objectives pursued by school boards, such as the improvement of school attendance, are seemingly hindered by parent-community attitudes. The task is often impeded by the reality that parental *experiences of education* shape attitudes which devalue educational priorities and reproduce generic patterns such as attitudinal behaviour. These *attitudes impact upon levels of community involvement in the L.S.B.C. and the school-community expectations which are a determinant of who is elected to the board and the relationships developed between the school and the board*. Ultimately, such forces impact upon the perceptions of local school board function and operation. A number of board members (Athabasca Delta) suggested that the *geographical isolation factor* inhibited student and community educational opportunity and vision, while other participants (Athabasca Delta) noted positive aspects of the isolation factor related to the advantages of insularity and protection.

Although respondents in each community referred to degrees of fragmentation of cultural values, apathetic community attitudes, and divisive community influences, data collected and analysed indicated *recent positive changes in levels of community*

*interest in local school board priorities.* This is exemplified in the stories about the 1992 election processes which attracted unprecedented interest in candidacy campaigning and community involvement. The impetus of such unparalleled community interest and involvement in elections for a multiplicity of reasons has seemingly invigorated a *thrust for change*. This force is manifesting itself in the Athabasca Delta local school board's *unfolding plan for assumption of community control of their education system*, Mistassiniy board's *current deliberations on the establishment of a micro school division incorporating the seven Bigstone schools* currently included in Northland School Division, and Atikameg-Sovereign board's preoccupation with the *need for changes which will ultimately lead to increased decision making at the school-community level*. Central to the understandings and the experiences shared by interviewees in each community for "community control of education" was the aspiration of informed leadership to harness the complex interactive local and global forces impacting upon the development of local school board trusteeship in each community.

***What are the understandings and experiences of local school board members about the Corporate Board governance structure?***

**Advocacy of governance restructuring.** The understandings and experiences shared by local board trustees illuminated wide-ranging perspectives of Corporate Board governance arrangements and generated multiple findings. A majority of the interviewees either had represented their communities at Corporate Board meetings in the capacity of chairman, or had attended meetings as observers. Two respondents reflected on progressive *incremental changes* to the Corporate Board function since the 1983 legislation due to local school board input into policy (Atikameg, Athabasca Delta), and inherent in the understandings and experiences of a majority of board

members interviewed was *the emergence of a multicultural perspective in Corporate Board membership.*

The Corporate Board was described by one respondent (Mistassiniy) as *a democratic system in practice* because communities elect board members to represent them at both the local and the corporate levels of governance. The nexus of L.S.B.C. chairmen was perceived by one informant as *the spinal cord of Northland School Division.* According to two participants (Athabasca Delta, Atikameg-Sovereign), the vested interest and strength of the Corporate Board of Trustees executive team is contained in *a collective commitment to a shared goal of better education for their children.*

The function of the Corporate Board was considered by four respondents (Atikameg, Mistassiniy) to be *a necessary governance support structure for the development of L.S.B.C.s.* An appreciation of the paternalistic attributes of the 'Big Board' was detected in the understandings of a minority of board members interviewed who perceived the Corporate Board structure as a longer term means of achieving incremental and increased local autonomy. Conversely, a conviction graphically expressed by one participant (Mistassiniy) was that the Corporate Board structure represented *"a monolithic monster" that changed a little, but not enough, to satisfy the needs of local communities.*

However, the realities expressed by a greater number of respondents (Athabasca Delta, Mistassiniy) suggested that the original intent in establishing Northland School Division was *to pave the road of decentralisation of educational decision making and management to local communities within a 10-year period.*

According to a number of board members (Athabasca Delta, Mistassiniy), *the Corporate Board governance structure in its current form is obsolete.* One local board trustee (Mistassiniy) *likened Corporate Board governance to Indian Affairs control which treated "us like kids who couldn't look after ourselves."*

The opinion of a few respondents in each community was that *a high cost of the objective of 'input' from 25 communities was borne in the cumbersome size of the Corporate Board and the complexity inherent in 25 different perspectives about 25 context-specific community priorities.* It was the view of some representatives of all three L.S.B.C.s that this phenomenon posed *unique challenges* to Corporate Board management strategies. In the opinion of two Athabasca Delta and four Mistassiniy participants, *the uniformity of Corporate Board policy for implementation across such a diversity of contexts was inappropriate.* Similarly, it was emphasised (Athabasca Delta) that *provincial policies and practices and mandatory curriculum were incompatible with identified educational and cultural priorities in many communities.*

A process adopted by the Corporate Board of prioritising divisional needs to determine funding allocation was considered by two respondents (Athabasca Delta, Mistassiniy) to *disregard* attention to *variables such as context specifics, 'uniqueness of need, 'emergent needs,' and the quality of local school board representation.*

Understandings shared about the process of managing recommendations submitted by L.S.B.C.s also illuminated wide-ranging views. Three participants (Atikameg-Sovereign, Athabasca Delta) applauded the routine adopted for recommendations to proceed from the L.S.B.C. to the *Standing Committee* for recommendation and to the *Corporate Board for prioritisation and decision.* In the opinion of one respondent (Atikameg-Sovereign), *"They [the Corporate Board] always went through with decisions that were good for all communities."* However, other board members (Athabasca Delta, Mistassiniy) indicated displeasure that *L.S.B.C.s enacted a delegation of 'recommendation only' and exhibited frustration with the "long, involved process."*

A majority of interviewees representing Athabasca Delta and Mistassiniy boards claimed that the Corporate Board management of the diversity of school communities in Northland School Division imposed *problems of resourcing inequity* because each

school community exercised one vote at the Corporate Board meeting irrespective of *the size of the school community and/or funding priorities such as tuition agreements*. According to a number of interviewees, a management strategy adopted more recently to expand Corporate Board-community interface and understanding of total divisional needs and priorities was *to schedule three meetings of the Corporate Board each year in communities*. Respondents perceived that this initiative *provided a source of mutual benefits*.

The question pertinent to the level of autonomy afforded to L.S.B.C.s in the current Corporate Board governance structure attracted mixed responses. Most of the board member interviewees from Atikameg-Sovereign, one from Athabasca Delta, and two Mistassiniy participants emphasised *the need for isolated communities to be supported by a wider governance structure*. However, a majority of Athabasca Delta and Mistassiniy respondents *perceived that the current governance structured afforded minimal autonomy* because "We have to abide by Northland's rules, and it seems like you don't have any control of your own community" (Athabasca Delta); and "The head guys are meeting while the audience watches, . . . and I can't speak" (Mistassiniy).

However, it was generally argued by respondents in all three communities that the increasing *level of input offered to L.S.B.C.s* by Northland was *a significant change*. Further, *Northland's commitment to support community mandates for community control of education systems was acknowledged*.

The opinion of a majority of interviewees (Athabasca Delta, Mistassiniy) was that *the decentralisation of the delivery of educational services to Area Offices was "not enough"*; in fact, it created *"too many bosses."* Others recognised "some sort of decentralisation, but it hasn't been fully decentralised." A push for a further step was evident in one respondent's comment: "They [Northland School Division] can't have it both ways. . . . They should either decentralise completely—authority, funding—or



centralise so that people are not continually subjected to multiple levels of bureaucracy" (Mistassiniy). Conversely, one participant (Athabasca Delta) and a majority of the Atikameg-Sovereign interviewees favoured the establishment of Area Offices because Area Office support *afforded immediate contact and assistance to school communities and was seen to be consistent with provincial patterns of decentralisation.*

A theme of *advocacy of structural change* of the Corporate Board governance structure pervaded the understandings and experiences shared by a majority of Athabasca Delta and Mistassiniy board members. Two participants (Athabasca Delta) opposed such change because of a perceived unreadiness of the community to assume local control, one participant (Mistassiniy) emphasised the need for some governing authority for L.S.B.C.s, and most of the Atikameg-Sovereign interviewees agreed with the principle of structural change but argued that "time was needed" for preparation to assume greater responsibility at the community level. A majority of the Athabasca Delta and Mistassiniy board members interviewed *advocated structural change which would allow more control locally and resolve perceived inequity of resource distribution.* In advocating restructuring of governance arrangements for the division, two board members (Athabasca Delta, Mistassiniy) envisaged a dissolution of the Corporate Board and a regionalisation of L.S.B.C.s within four or five independent divisions.

***What are the experiences and understandings of local school board members about local school board organisation and practice?***

**Quest for community control of education.** According to the understandings and experiences shared by participants, observed routines of board meetings, and the analyses of board minutes and policy manuals, local school board organisation and

practice are established within *a clearly defined organisational structure*.

Respondents in each of the three communities were conversant with, and observed, *well-established meeting procedures*. Meetings which are scheduled for the same time each month appeared to be a particular challenge for Atikameg-Sovereign due to an apparent inability to attract a quorum; or, as one respondent suggested, "Sometimes it takes a while for a new board to figure things out."

Amidst the wide-ranging perspectives canvassed about local school board organisation and practice, Atikameg-Sovereign appeared to be enveloped in a settling-down phase, while Athabasca Delta and Mistassiniy respondents seemed to be comfortable with L.S.B.C. identity, purpose, and board member relationships. Respondents in each community emphasised the importance of *strong, informed local board leadership*. Further, participants in the study expressed concern about *the limitations aligned to delegated authority to L.S.B.C.s*; specifically, the delegation of "recommending authority only" by the Corporate Board. An approach to *problem solving* adopted by Atikameg-Sovereign local board was to "talk about it" at the board meeting; involve all stakeholders in resolving the problems within the community; and, if necessary, call upon the area superintendent and representatives of the Corporate Board.

*The objectives* described by interviewees in each community for local board organisation and practice were focused on *the improvement of education in the community through greater decision making at the community level*. In the pursuit of the attainment of that objective, each board adopts *dissimilar local-management approaches* which are generated by the respective community milieu to fulfil its obligation to (a) the local community electorate, and (b) the governance office of the Corporate Board.

Amongst the individual and collective priorities articulated by newly elected board members was *an awareness of the need for board member learning and*

*development.* This was exemplified in the range of activities undertaken by board groups and individuals, such as orientation workshops, site visits to other systems, exposure to policy manuals, observation of experienced board members, and modelling activities.

According to respondents in each community, each school board is involved in *the enactment of delegated responsibilities specified by the Corporate Board.* These include selection of staffing from "short lists" compiled by Northland, approval of school organisational plans, oversight of budgets, and the evaluation of principals. While collectively recognising the importance of establishing and maintaining positive day-to-day working relationships with the school, *individual boards interpreted the responsibility of board-school interface in different ways.* For some board members (Athabasca Delta), initiatives such as *school-community involvement in the development of a school discipline policy, hiring a counsellor, and activities to resolve the perceived isolation of teachers from the community were constructive strategies* adopted to develop a positive board-school interface. Respondents from the Mistassiniy board focused on *similar proactive approaches* such as *the development of a mission statement designed "to get better schooling for kids," the establishment of a Cultural Committee to identify cultural priorities for educational program implementation, and the recognition and promotion locally and at the Corporate Board level of the achievements of the students.* Atikameg-Sovereign interviewees described a more reactive approach to board-school interface such as *"fighting for [the appointment] of native-speaking paraprofessionals," the introduction of a hot-lunch program, and teacher-orientation activities.* With respect to day-to-day involvement in class programs, respondents in the three communities expressed a common hesitancy about observing and assisting in classrooms because of a clearly perceived delineation of school and teacher role functions. Interviewees in Atikameg-Sovereign preferred to visit the school when called to assist with a concern or present

achievement awards and Christmas goodies. Three respondents (Mistassiniy) felt that 'visibility' in relation to the school and involvement of parent/board members in activities such as field trips were important. Respondents in each of the L.S.B.C.s expressed by varying degrees *a need for the further development of understanding and professional relationships between the board and the school and/or teachers.*

Clearly, board members interviewed in each of the communities are individually and collectively committed to *democratic representation of their constituents.* A specific challenge identified by members of the three boards pertinent to the further development of board-community relationships was the need for *a full realisation by board members and the community of the power invested in the board function.*

It was suggested by a number of board members (Mistassiniy) that *individual board member growth, collective board cohesion, and informed, visionary community initiative and support* were important *facets of L.S.B.C. effectiveness.* However, the experience of a majority of board members interviewed was that, although electors of board members demonstrated unprecedented levels of interest and support during the 1992 elections, minimal ongoing community interest/support was apparent. This is evidenced by a shared board member experience of an apparent lack of interest in community members attending board meetings "unless there's a problem."

A common theme aligned to board organisation and practice was *a recognised need for community-education programs to clarify board functions, to reinforce cultural and educational values, and to bridge the understandings of culturally diverse ethnic groups.* The conviction of respondents in each community was that boards had a responsibility to 'wake up the community' and get them involved in education through the organisation of public meetings and forums (Mistassiniy). Approaches adopted by Athabasca Delta board members to fulfil this responsibility were *to involve community-based organisations in the school program and to work through their places of employment "to push education."*

A compelling force currently impinging upon local board organisation and practice, according to representatives of the three boards, is *a community-derived pressure for increased levels of decision making and/or community control of education*. This is evidenced by Athabasca Delta's *ongoing negotiations with Northland and Mistassiniy's meetings with representatives of Bigstone Band schools regarding the establishment of a mini school division*. Interconnected with this goal of community control are the current activities of the Athabasca Delta and Mistassiniy boards focused on *the mobilisation of divisive influences such as community-faction groups and individual board members less supportive of the community-control concept*.

A preoccupation with *the need for organisational infrastructures such as administrative expertise and board member leadership training was noted* (Athabasca Delta, Mistassiniy, Atikameg-Sovereign) and was interpreted as a prelude to affirmative action.

Concomitant with the acquisition of an increased level of autonomy are the aspirations of community co-operation and cohesion, control of the recruitment of teachers, an increase in the number and quality of school graduates, the appointment of a career counsellor, and control of school staffing (Athabasca Delta). Priorities identified by Mistassiniy respondents to assist the evolution of community control of education included visionary and cohesive community leadership, community co-operation and cohesion, strong locally based administrative support structures, and the ability of the community to embrace and adapt to *change*. Atikameg-Sovereign board members interviewed implied that growth and cohesion and development of the L.S.B.C., "more power," community education and training, and preparation of future leaders were important goals in the journey towards increased community involvement in educational decision making. Implicit in each of the expressed aspirations for effective board organisation and practice is the theme aligned to *the*

*quest for "community harmony, balance, and shared experiences,"* a recommended objective for the Corporate Board vision statement.

### **Discussion**

The findings of the study are best interpreted in light of what was previously known about the literature. (Merriam, 1988, p. 63)

The answers to the research questions exposed multiple board member understandings and experiences about the development of local school board trusteeship. The objective of this section of Chapter 8 is to discuss the findings identified in the previous section in relation to relevant literature reviewed.

The researcher's interpretation of the understandings and experiences shared by board members about the development of local school board trusteeship illuminated a range of interactive and dynamic forces conceivably affecting macro (division) and micro (community) contextual and organisational relationships. As suggested by Lebot (1972; cited in Hanson, 1986): "The educational system cannot be understood simply as a formal institution of legal dispositions and organizational charts. Of greater significance is the relationship of power, force, and influence between diverse centers of power and pressure groups" (p. 51).

Although it has been emphasised in this study that the influence of an extensive range of situational variables shapes the unique character of each school community and the subsequent internal machinations of L.S.B.C. trusteeship development, a number of pervading forces which span diversities in the three communities are identified and discussed. They include (a) history-laden values, (b) powerful perceptions, (c) motivation influences, (d) environmental forces, (e) governance perspectives, and (f) role conceptions.

**History-laden values.** As suggested in research previously undertaken (Armstrong, 1987; Barman et al., 1987; Coburn, 1985; Indian Nations at Risk,

1991), it may be assumed that models of traditional native governance may influence the development of native educational governance structures. However, it is contended by the researcher that the effect of the forces associated with history must be recognised in the shaping of L.S.B.C. governance structure. According to the understandings of participants in this study, a general process of transformation from a state of relative autonomy both in cultural and political terms to that of encapsulation has been experienced by native people during recent decades. In 1968 Hawthorn described the elements of this cultural change process:

For the first time, thousands of Indians found themselves living in permanent, sedentary communities with clearly defined spacial and social boundaries. A growing body of formal rules governing corporate land usage, residential rights, band leadership rights, and so on gave these mostly small communities a legal character and exclusiveness which stood in a marked contrast to the traditional residential grouping. (p. 177)

Amongst the outcomes of the imposition of the new social and political superstructure were the social and cultural dislocations which evolved through assimilationist education systems, a litany of socioeconomic distractions such as substance and welfare dependency, and the fragmentation of traditional family and community values. These forces individually and collectively act as catalysts in the shaping and reshaping of attitudes and values which stimulate multiple behaviours, and ultimately shape the organisation's systemic agenda. Kirkness (1992) advocated a development of education systems which enable native children "to develop the fundamental attitudes and values [which] . . . are found in our history, in our legends, and in the culture" (p. 28). Although a fragmentation of cultural values emphasised by respondents in this study may preclude a realisation of this goal, the transmission of individual and institutional values in an organisational setting is a powerful influence on operational functions. Wirt and Kirst (1982) emphasised the complexity inherent in this force: "The board . . . is not static, nor are its members value free. They modify, regulate, innovate or refuse political demands in response

to a number of value preferences" (p. 128). As indicated in the findings of this study, the individual and collective history-laden values which elected board members bring to their respective L.S.B.C. responsibilities have a potential to influence significantly the development of local school board trusteeship. For example, the reasons expressed by individual board members themselves for seeking election to the L.S.B.C., their perceptions of community expectations, and their understandings of the role responsibility of board members reflected the influence of history-laden values. This observation supports Tallerico's (1991b) claim that "who these individuals are, what they bring with them and how they develop over time can be critical variables in local education policy-making processes" (p. 94). The findings in the study emphasised a necessity for board members as leaders in the development of trusteeship to balance history-laden personal and civic values with changing community preferences and the perceived boundaries of both community and Corporate Board zones of tolerance.

**Powerful perceptions.** Interacting with the force of values emanating from historical experience are the powerful individual perceptions of L.S.B.C. electors, candidates, and elected board members. According to Allport (1955), the way persons define their situation constitutes for them its reality (p. 84). Further, in exploring the complexity of this phenomenon in an educational context, Johnson (1987) stated, "Social behavior in educational settings is guided not merely by an assumed objective reality but by actors' individual perceptions and by the factors that shape and distort those perceptions" (p. 209). Perceptions shared by board members in this study about the development of local school board trusteeship are influenced by subtle factors such as organisational conditions, personal experiences of policy initiatives and legislation, goals and aspirations, personality, and prior social and cultural experiences (p. 211). Similarly, through dyadic interplay the community's perceptions and actions also affect the behaviour and thus the perceptions of those



board members they seek to appraise (p. 214). This interactive process generates behavioural-relationship structures which dominate L.S.B.C. activities and shapes local community governance patterns.

**Motivation influences.** The influences which individually motivated a record number of candidates to stand for election to L.S.B.C.s in 1992 and the factors which caused an unprecedented number of community members to vote for particular candidates represent a force which penetrated the development of local school board trusteeship in the three communities studied. In exploring the basic concept of motivation, Nadler and Lawler (1977) concluded that motivation is greatest when (a) the individual believes that the behaviour will lead to outcomes, (b) the individual believes that these outcomes have positive value for him or her, and (c) the individual believes that he or she is able to perform at the desired level (p. 28). This individually perceived association between actions and outcomes conveys a personal expectation of the process which shapes collective board member behaviour and local board organisational development within the contextual parameters of each community. For example, differing board member perceptions of the link between actions and outcomes in two communities created variability in motivation within the board membership, which led to a fragmentation of organisational goals. On a broader governance level, the perceived link between actions and outcomes by members of L.S.B.C.s was at times incongruent with the expectations of the Corporate Board. Although the nature of specific motivating influences may change with the experience of board membership, board training, socialisation processes, and the demands of constituents, individual motives driven by civic and/or self-interest incentives are powerful forces affecting the development of L.S.B.C. trusteeship in Athabasca Delta, Mistassiniy, and Atikameg-Sovereign school communities.

**Environmental forces.** The penetration of local and external political, economic, social, and demographic forces identified by respondents in this study

make it more and more difficult for school boards to control agendas and shape decision outcomes. Wirt and Kirst (1982) observed a significant decrease in the decision-making powers of superintendents and local boards through forces such as increasing intervention and regulation by federal and state governments (p. 21). As emphasised by respondents in this study, this force is aggravated by the state of a diminishing economy—fewer resources and the effects of the power of new concepts emergent from demographic and social change. Central to the experience of board members in two communities was the emergence of a multicultural dimension to local school board trustee development. Svensson (1988) described the implications of this change in the following terms: "Closer ties to the larger society are thus established, resulting in de-autonomization of the ethnic group" (p. 77). As identified by participants in this study, an outcome of this evolutionary development is the shift towards a multilateral decision-making governance approach which encourages development of trusteeship characterised by cross-cultural understanding, acceptance, and trust. According to Kirkness (1992):

It is somewhat like creating a new educational world which includes First Nations as an integral and active participant. After all, First Nations education must go beyond the bounds of being only for First Nations. Our place in this land must be understood by all Canadians so that we may work together toward building a more harmonious world. (p. 103)

This concept of the emergent nature of educational governance structures for predominantly native communities was shared by Power (1989), who suggested neither segregation nor assimilation approaches, but "integration where the indigenous are cultural equals in democratic multicultural nations moving toward a world-federated, more peaceful international society" (p. 49)

However, the development of an integrated approach to governance is constantly challenged by a force of cultural diversity as elected trustees strive to translate complex individual and community interests into a mission which emphasises cultural equality. Findings in this study highlighted a need for the development of community

cohesion and harmony as a particular challenge for L.S.B.C. governance. As reported by Hentges' (1985), community-derived influences and political activism are often the means for neutralising board, school-community, and governance-authority relationships and minimising organisational development potential (p. 32). In the study of the three Northland communities, internal conflict and factionalism often created decision and allegiance dilemmas for some L.S.B.C. members and led to coercion and division which threatened a fragmentation of organisational objectives. In such circumstances, the discretionary local authority invested in the board tended to reduce the role of the L.S.B.C. to that of a competitive reactive organisation trying to juggle diverse and changing coalitions across different issues. On the other hand, the maintenance of cohesive board relationships during political activism and community disruption in these isolated communities tended to develop a community sense of isolation from the L.S.B.C., a 'them and us' attitude due to a perceived exclusion from the governance process. This fragmentation generated a defensive response from the community as it sought to reassert itself through 'hotly contested' election campaigns and the defeat of incumbent board members (Hentges).

**Governance perspectives.** Understandings and experiences of board members shared in this study indicate that governance leadership and oversight of predominantly native local school communities by L.S.B.C.s is becoming increasingly complex. Undoubtedly, the effects of incredible diversity poses a unique challenge to trustees as they contend with perceived restrictive legislation, changing philosophies, and resource inadequacy and inequity. Further, as variously described by Andrews (1970), Boyd (1975), Greene (1992), the Institute for Educational Leadership (1986), Tucker and Zeigler (1980), and Hayden (1986), school-board relationships are beleaguered by conflicting cross-currents of pressures inherent in (a) the ambiguous nature of policy-making and administrative functions in educational governance, and (b) a sustained incongruence between lay control and the power of bureaucracy.

Findings in this study revealed that elected members to L.S.B.C.s expected that the 1983 Northland School Division legislation would lead to a significant increase in community-based decision making. However, the Corporate Board delegation of 'recommendation only' in critical governance responsibilities such as finance, educational-program priorities, and personnel management left many respondents in this study feeling frustrated and restricted. This technical approach to local governance in which the Corporate Board is the dominant actor in decision and policy making is similar to the hierarchical model of governance described by Tucker and Zeigler. The L.S.B.C.s "act less as decision-making bodies and more as communication links between the superintendent [Corporate Board] and the public" (p. 6). Further, the objectives of a political orientation to governance which depicts a process of bargaining among the superintendent (Corporate Board), local board, and community (Greene, 1992) was not seen by a majority of respondents in the study to provide the level of decision-making authority deemed necessary to satisfy the preferences of diverse L.S.B.C. needs and priorities.

Although a few board members in each school community appreciated the paternalistic support structure of the Corporate Board, a majority of respondents in this study suggested that the "one policy fits all" approach adopted attracted the influence of perception-driven, value-based forces which invariably lead to prejudice, resource inequity, and community "interest-group" coercion.

Findings in this study indicated that a majority of board members in varying degrees seek governance orientations which *eliminate the historic paternalistic approach, permit community involvement* in educational decision-making processes, and *facilitate community control of education systems*. While recognising the significance of the regionalisation of the delivery of educational services to Area Offices in 1988, a number of respondents claimed that this was 'not enough' to satisfy a current thrust for increased levels of community control of education and called for

a further step in the decentralisation process. According to Hanson (1989), the concept of decentralisation "can be examined in terms of degree and territorial space. The degree of decentralisation can be viewed on a continuum involving the transfer of decision-making authority" (p. 2) to lower units. In further exploring the process of decentralisation in developing countries, Rondinelli (1981) outlined the distinctions that can be made among three stages of decentralisation:

1. *Deconcentration*: The shifting of workload (tasks) to subordinate units *without a transfer of power* to exercise substantial local discretion in decision making.

2. *Delegation*: The transfer or creation of broad authority to plan and implement decisions concerning specific activities—or a variety of activities within specific spacial boundaries—to an organisation that is technically and administratively capable of carrying out the delegated responsibilities. In this stage of a decentralised process, the central authority establishes and maintains a policy framework and retains authority command.

3. *Devolution*: The transfer of power to geographic units of local government that henceforth lie outside the formal command structure of the central government. This is a very high degree of decentralisation (pp. 137-138).

The perspectives of governance conveyed by respondents in three predominantly native communities in Northland School Division suggested that 'deconcentration,' a very low degree of decentralisation, occurred with the shifting of workloads to Area Offices without the transfer of decision-making authority. The delegation of specific tasks to L.S.B.C.s for execution within a centralised (Corporate Board) policy and authority structure suggest that the second stage of 'delegation,' a medium degree of decentralisation, is in place. Findings in this study indicated that a majority of board member respondents in Athabasca Delta, Mistassiniy, and Atikameg-Sovereign seek the third stage of the decentralisation process, the transfer of authority, a very high degree of decentralisation that will facilitate power for L.S.B.C.s to develop and

control community-education systems. Concomitant with this thrust for change was an expressed board member recognition of the need for the development of appropriate educational governance infrastructures.

In describing administrative development in developing countries as *a qualitative increase in the ability of organisations to accomplish their goals more efficiently*, Hanson (1986) emphasised the merits of incremental change strategies: "small reforms focusing on specific problem areas over an extended period. . . . A strong administrative infrastructure depends more on work norms, values, attitudes, motivation, and the willingness to take risks than on the availability of funds" (pp. xiv-xv).

**Role conception.** The question of how board member interviewees constructed their realities of L.S.B.C. and Corporate Board governance arrangements represents a force which affects individual and collective board member understandings of member and board role responsibilities. For example, when the governance structure was perceived by participants to have a bureaucratic orientation, some L.S.B.C. members resented the 'delegated recommendation only' responsibility and adopted a proactive role to leadership responsibilities. Board members who recognised the centralised-control orientation of the Corporate Board, and for various reasons supported it, adopted a more passive approach to L.S.B.C. role responsibilities. For participants who viewed governance as a political process, role interpretation tended to focus on 'lobbying for specific community needs,' demonstrated accountability to constituents, and the quest for legislated change to restructure Corporate Board governance arrangements and facilitate local control of educational governance. Within respective role interpretations, board member understanding and attitudes canvassed in this study tended to range from a proactive supportiveness of the Corporate Board governance arrangements to reactive antipathy towards Corporate Board governance and vigilance in pursuit of community control of community education systems. Hayden (1986)

claimed that misconceptions of roles often affect the balance of power in school boards and impact upon school board relationships and organisational development.

The constant turbulence in school communities buffeted by change necessitates a role conception which reflects local school board governance as an open system interacting with and affected by the environment. According to Hanson (1985), in this context educational leaders such as board members should

strive to identify, plan, and execute those actions that effectively and efficiently link environment demands with organizational capabilities and worker needs. As the relationships between the environment, organization and workers change, so must the leadership in response to the new situation. (p. 177)

This requires a development of local school board trusteeship which facilitates the management of changing organisational priorities and environmental relationships within and beyond a specific organisational context.

### **Summary**

The conceptual framework developed in this discussion views the development of local school board trusteeship as being shaped by the interdependent and interactive impact of six socioeconomic, political, and demographic forces. They are (a) history-laden values, (b) powerful perceptions, (c) motivation influences, (d) environmental forces, (e) governance perspectives, and (f) role conceptions. Each of the six forces identified represents one item in a range of phenomena which independently affects the development of local school board trusteeship. Collectively, these subtle and complex forces interact to generate behind-the-scenes behaviours which influence agenda-building activities and ultimately determine governance structures, power and authority relationships, decision-making processes, and organisational direction of the respective L.S.B.C. According to Cobb and Elder (1972), agenda-building, predecisional social processes "assume an inextricable and mutually interdependent relationship between the concerns [forces] generated in the social environment and the

vitality of the governmental process" (p. 163). Socioeconomic, political, and demographic forces unique to the situations in the three communities studied penetrate contextual and organisational L.S.B.C. relationships and shape what ultimately occurs in the school-community organisational arena. Subsequently, an extensive range of major situational variables emerges. This phenomenon precludes a categorical definition or regulation of the development of local school board trusteeship and emphasises a context-specific process.



## Chapter 9

### Overview and Reflections

The objective in this chapter is to present a brief overview of the study and to reflect upon the understandings and learnings acquired by the researcher about the development of L.S.B.C. trusteeship in three predominantly native communities in Northland School Division.

#### Overview

In undertaking this study, the researcher determined to discover and describe some answers to the following research question:

*What are the understandings and the experiences of L.S.B.C. members about the development of L.S.B.C. trusteeship in three predominantly native communities in Northland School Division?*

Concomitant with a global trend toward decentralisation of authority for the management of education systems is the research question identified in Chapter 1 pertinent to the development of trusteeship in predominantly native communities.

In view of the ongoing challenges and priorities pertinent to the development of native educational governance identified in the literature review (Chapter 2), it is deemed by the researcher that a current investigation of this research question is both appropriate and timely.

As detailed in Chapter 3, the researcher adopted a naturalistic inquiry case-study approach to the research, explored multiple on-site sources of data, and handled three units of analysis within one case, a predominantly native school jurisdiction. This methodological approach was adopted because it was deemed important to understand the constructed realities of L.S.B.C. trustees about L.S.B.C. organisational development and the behaviour of people in those organisations through an on-site investigation which focused on "all the rich confusion of their daily existence"

(Owens, 1982, p. 6). Data were collected during a five-month period, February 7-June 30, 1993, through conversational and unstructured on-site interviews, extensive observation of community and organisational routines, and the analysis of relevant documents.

In Chapter 4 the evolutionary development of the educational governance of Northland School Division is described to alert the reader to the unique contextual characteristics of the case: a predominantly native school jurisdiction. The stories related by 19 L.S.B.C. trustees provided rich descriptions of personal understandings and experiences of the development of L.S.B.C. trusteeship and are presented in verbatim quotations in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 of this report.

In Chapter 8 a synopsis of the findings of the study is presented and discussed in relation to relevant literature. The understandings and experiences of L.S.B.C. trusteeship described by participants indicated to the researcher that the development of L.S.B.C. trusteeship in three predominantly native communities in Northland School Division *precludes categorical definition or regulation and emphasises context-specific and process-related outcomes*. Conflicting socioeconomic, political, and demographic interactive forces unique to each community situation penetrate contextual relationships and shape organisational development.

Although an extensive range of major situational variables emanating from history-laden cultural values and associated forces dominated the understandings and experiences of respondents, a common theme reiterated by a majority of L.S.B.C. members in each community was *a quest for community control of community education*. In view of the findings in this study, particularly the emphasis on a context-specific development orientation, pursuit of the *articulated* goal for community control of education to enable the development of educational governance structures which reflect the uniqueness of specific community contexts is appropriate.

## **Reflections**

During the last decade the growth and development of L.S.B.C.s has occurred largely within the parameters of the Northland School Division Corporate Board of Trustees governance structure. As reported in Chapter 4, the evolutionary development of this unique and predominantly native school jurisdiction has been characterised by change and the necessity for ongoing learning and adaptation. The institution of the 1983 Northland School Division Act provided legislation for elected L.S.B.C.s and significantly marked a beginning of local school-community involvement in educational decision-making processes. At that time the newly elected chairmen of the 27 elected L.S.B.C.s composed the first Corporate Board of Trustees, and this continues to be accepted practice.

As the first elected political leaders of Northland School Division, the Corporate Board of Trustees developed a governance strategy which adopted a 'process' approach to policy development and implementation in preference to a 'blueprint' approach. According to Graham (1990):

Advocates of blueprint or programmed implementation see detailed policy design as the engine which drives execution. In contrast, the policy approach conceives of policy as necessarily being in a continuous state of evolution. Part of that evolution is the continuous adaptation of the programs and organizations that emerge at the beginning of a particular initiative. Forces creating the need for such modifications include: changes in the level of interest and commitment by key actors, changes in the availability of different kinds of resources and the emergence of different policies, programs and organizations to deal with the issue at hand. (p. 275)

In exercising a leadership role in this process approach to governance at both community and corporate levels of administration, elected L.S.B.C. board members have played a significant role during the last decade as key actors in the development of L.S.B.C. trusteeship in Northland School Division. However, the governance process which has required time for learning and adaptation at all levels of the organisation has not been managed without recognised challenges. Stacey (1992)

pointed out that since change in dynamically complex circumstances is nonlinear, we cannot predict or guide the process with any precision. "The long-term future of such organizations is completely unknowable because the links between specific actions and specific outcomes become lost in the detail of what happens" (p. 124). However, Fullan (1993) traced the interactive relationships between learning, adaptation, movement, and growth in dynamically complex organisations:

Learning organizations neither ignore nor attempt to dominant their environments. Rather, they learn to live with them interactively. Continuous change is built into the relationship because widespread interactions under conditions of dynamic complexity demand constant attention and movement. Change forces are seen as inevitable and essential to learning and growth. (p. 84)

While findings in this study emphasise the centrality of contextual specifics and variables to the development of L.S.B.C. trusteeship, Land and Jarman (1992) claimed that successful evolutionary development requires more than simply adapting to an environment. They suggested that in designing organisational structures, it is also important to reach out and build connections in other environments. *Growth and evolution*, as defined by Land and Jarman, means "continuously making more extensive and increasingly complex connections inside the growing organism and with the varied outside environments" (p. 30). This is an important planning consideration for educational governance developers in this study who are currently advocating a shift from the 'deconcentration' and 'delegation' stages of decentralisation to a 'devolution' stage involving the transfer of authority to a relatively autonomous L.S.B.C. administrative unit which can henceforth act virtually independently of its former Corporate Board organisation (Rondinelli, 1981).

In a study of decentralisation in developing countries which spanned a decade, Hanson (1989) identified eight factors which influenced the achievement of the goals of decentralisation. They are (a) collaboration, (b) political party politics, (c) incremental approaches, (d) continuity, (e) costs, (f) budget control, (g) regional

boundaries, and (h) formalisation (pp. 24-26). In reflecting on the stories related by L.S.B.C. members, it appears to the researcher that the factors identified by Hanson may be an appropriate consideration for those L.S.B.C.s in Northland School Division contemplating the 'devolution of authority' stage in the decentralisation process.

**Collaboration.** This factor addresses the extent to which all stakeholders in the decentralisation process are able and willing to work together to achieve shared goals. In the study conducted by Hanson (1989), it was found that more extensive collaboration networks enhanced the effectiveness of the decentralisation process.

Amidst the eclectic range of perceptions presented by respondents in the study of three L.S.B.C.s in Northland School Division, it appeared that co-operation and collaboration were commonly identified goals. However, in reality the allocation of powers between board members and to board members by constituents tended to be distorted by the element of cultural diversity in Fort Chipewyan and Mistassiniy and divisive-faction activity in Atikameg-Sovereign. While participants' interpretations of historical events in the three communities indicated that leaders representing the respective community identities, organisations, and factions were able to make political compromises on critical issues when the welfare of the community was at stake, there is little evidence of sustained collaboration. An objective stated by one participant for elected board members to relinquish particular allegiance to a band or ethnic group and really 'stick together' in working towards unified community control of education lightens the stark reality that social dynamic forces continue to fragment community cohesion and collaboration.

The current thrust by L.S.B.C.s for devolved authority to design community controlled educational governance structures raises an important question pertinent to organisational development: Whose values, attitudes, beliefs, and norms will transcend community division, integrate organisation members, and develop

educational governance structures which reflect community-wide values and aspirations? In view of Land and Jarman's (1992) concept of successful organisational growth and evolutionary development, the challenge to L.S.B.C. members is first to connect community-based divisive influences and then to integrate the varied outside environments.

**Political party politics.** This factor refers to the extent to which political party politics influences the development of governance infrastructures, policy formulation, program priorities, and personnel-management structures. In the study of the decentralisation process in selected developing countries, Hanson (1989) described the adverse effects of the politicisation in policy, programs, and personnel appointments in the entire educational system.

For the purposes of reflecting on the findings of the study of three L.S.B.C.s in Northland School Division, the concept of political party politics is interpreted to relate to community factions and clan influences. A number of participants in the study of the development of L.S.B.C. trusteeship in three communities in Northland School Division emphasised the pervasive influence of local politics on organisational development at both community and corporate governance levels. Contrary to the concern expressed by many participants about fragmentation of cultural values, there was evidence that native traditional norms such as cultural unity, extended-family relationships, and attitudes pertinent to sharing continue to influence decision-making processes aligned to policy development, educational-program priorities, and recruitment of personnel for culturally diverse communities. Some respondents described an expectation by constituents that elected board members would "look after" specific ethnic-group interests, while other participants referred to the complexity of traditional clan relationships 'just below the surface' which often created a conflict of interest in decision-making processes. Further, it is evident that community division emanating from federal and provincial governance allegiance,

rights for treaty Indians, and the emergence of a multicultural representation in two L.S.B.C.s and at the Corporate Board level continue to intensify the potential for organisational 'party politics.' A number of respondents referred to the politically challenging dual-representative role of L.S.B.C. chairmen as they attempt to negotiate strongly the recommendations of the community and at the same time represent responsibly all L.S.B.C.s, communities, and students in Northland School Division as a political skill often distorted by party politics. It was reported that some L.S.B.C. chairmen found it stressful on returning to their communities to advise their board members and constituents that the L.S.B.C. recommendation had not been approved within the democratic process of prioritisation of divisional needs.

A further challenge to L.S.B.C. members to compromise political party politics is inherent in their individual and collective choices associated with staff appointments and cultural-program priorities. A strong desire was expressed by a number of respondents "to employ our own native people because they understand the culture and are more suitable to work with our children." However, devolved authority for recruitment processes would likely present technical, political, and ideological challenges for a locally controlled educational governance authority. First, the demand for native teachers to fulfil the aspiration of "native teachers for native students" far exceeds both the available supply of teachers and the potential invested in current levels of training programs. Second, in a small isolated community where employment opportunities for native people are a political priority, recruitment processes are often dominated by cultural suitability at the expense of technical competence and organisational efficiency. A further complexity arises within the assumption that native staff will most appropriately serve the needs and priorities inherent in a multicultural-community education system. Third, outcomes of decision-making processes aligned to the identification of cultural priorities for the educational program were raised by respondents in one community because "native students

themselves are questioning the necessity to continue a long tradition in this school of native dancing performances."

At this stage in the development of L.S.B.C. trusteeship, indications are that the communities are becoming more selective about the election of board members. The sense of participants in this study was that they were electing "well-educated and astute politicians" who could best manage the myriad of community interests and develop strategies to compromise the potential politicisation of educational decision-making processes.

**Incremental approaches.** This factor refers to the implementation strategy adopted for the decentralisation process. Findings in the study conducted by Hanson (1989) indicate that decentralisation in a staged approach adopted in two developing countries allowed the time and opportunity to experiment and make adjustments to the original design and proved to be a very successful approach. Conversely, an "all-at-once" strategy employed in a third developing country proved very difficult to integrate and execute.

During the last decade L.S.B.C.s in Northland School Division have experienced two stages of decentralisation through an evolutionary process of deconcentration of tasks from the central office and the delegation of specific decision-making responsibilities to L.S.B.C.s. A majority of respondents in two of the three communities visited conveyed a sense of urgency to take the final step of devolution of authority enabling autonomous decision making at the local community level. In articulating a vision for local control of educational governance, interviewees in the third treaty-Metis community envisaged a necessity for a process approach to allow time for training initiatives and the establishment of appropriate organisational infrastructure. Conversely, in advocating what appeared to be an all-at-once approach (within the current L.S.B.C.s three-year term), a majority of respondents in two communities contemplated an urgent need for the establishment of



governance infrastructure with the aid of internal expertise and/or external resource personnel, the appointment of a superintendent, and intensive needs-focused training programs to prepare board members for governance responsibilities such as policy development, fiscal administration, and personnel management.

While observation of the L.S.B.C. organisation and practice routines in the three communities noted management strategies commensurate with the demands of 'delegated' authority, adoption of an all-at-once takeover of responsibility at this point in time would necessitate an unprecedented mobilisation of community-based human resources and expertise, connections with external environments, socialisation in governance ways, and strong united community support and commitment. In commenting on the prospect of the all-at-once approach to devolution of authority, one board member in each of the two communities stated that it was "important not to jump in too fast so that we get in beyond our level of capability at any one time"; and, "besides, the community has to have time to learn and grow too."

An option to this all-at-once strategy that is consistent with the tried and proven process approach to decentralisation in this school jurisdiction may well be the devolution of authority for one facet of management at a time. For example, most L.S.B.C. members are currently involved in staff-selection processes but do not have devolved authority to hire or manage personnel. A devolution of authority for personnel management as a first step would enable time for full-time planning and policy development in one area of management responsibility; would allow experimentation, evaluation, and adaptation of implementation processes; would encourage the establishment of networks with external environments; and would incrementally build sound community-based management practice.

**Continuity.** This factor refers to the extent to which administrative personnel continue in positions and permit a visible measure of developmental growth of the organisation during the decentralisation process. In the study conducted by Hanson

(1989), it was noted that high levels of staff turnover tended to jeopardise program continuity.

Although the adoption of an incremental approach to devolved authority for community control of community education systems may offer longer term management-development potential in three communities in Northland School Division, the goal of *continuity of personnel* may still be threatened by party politics, changes in Band Council leadership, changing community preferences, availability and quality of staff, tenure of education trustees, and the tenure and quality of leadership. Visionary leadership is needed to rationalise educational-program priorities beyond changes in administrative staff and fluctuating community priorities so that existing programs such as Alberta curriculum are not dropped in favour of new programs focused on cultural priorities and/or other instant reform measures so often associated with rapidity of staff turnover.

**Costs.** This factor refers to the extent to which the costs associated with the decentralisation process are estimated and met. The investigation reported by Hanson (1989) indicated that inadequate development funds and the inappropriate management of funds hindered the decentralisation process. Problems of discontinuity of staff were exacerbated by emergent management attitudes that 'money was no object' and/or that funds assigned to special-development programs could be sacrificed to the differing demands of an incoming administration. Citing an example of a successful decentralisation process, Hanson stated: "Each new national government was careful to build on what the past government had created in education; thus significant administrative development took place" (p. 26).

As the researcher reflected on the findings of the study of governance development in three predominantly native communities in Northland School Division, it became evident that the estimation and management of costs were crucial factors in a successful devolution-of-authority process. In view of the nation's current economic

climate, recent indicators such as diminishing resource levels, education-budget cutbacks, and financial constraints forecast ominous potential for local control over maintenance of educational-program priorities and special-development-program initiatives. The continuing dependency of L.S.B.C.s in Northland School Division on the provision of adequate and appropriately managed federal and provincial funding for education programs and priorities is an important consideration for L.S.B.C.s deliberating the next step of devolution of authority to establish and administer community education governance systems.

**Budget control.** This factor refers to the extent to which control over personnel appointments and financial expenditures was devolved to local units. In the study conducted by Hanson (1989), it was concluded that a continuation of centralised budget control impeded the decentralisation process because local decision making in support of identified local needs could not occur to any meaningful extent.

For a majority of board members in this study representing the interests of two larger school communities, the incentive of local control of funding accelerated the 'push' for community control of community education. Currently, a perceived inequity in funding allocations emanating from Corporate Board divisional prioritisation processes, disparate school communities (size, needs, ethnic mix), restriction of one vote per L.S.B.C. at the corporate level irrespective of the size of the school community, and dissimilar tuition-agreement funding levels left a number of board members feeling that funding allocated was not adequately addressing identified needs and priorities of local school communities. Respondents in each community advocating a transfer of fiscal authority expressed an awareness of the need for a sound fiscal-management infrastructure. However, the complexity inherent in funding arrangements for multicultural school communities with a dominant treaty-Indian student populace funded through tuition agreements will require a high level of fiscal expertise and management to ensure appropriate funding levels for the

educational needs of all students within the community education system. This goal is particularly important in view of perceptions of the current situation provided by one respondent:

Right now the Metis people get left out because they can't compete with the bands who have got all the money to spend. This is concerning nontreaty members of the community because if education is community controlled, there's no tax base in the community, . . . and who is going to pay the "tuition" . . . or whatever funding is required for educating "nontreaty" children in the community?

A further consideration necessary prior to a transfer of fiscal authority is the provision for a discrete allocation of funding for education transferred directly to the education authority as opposed to transfer of funds to the Band Council for dissemination to the education authority and other community-based essential-services departments. This may assist to ensure stability in education funding levels and assist fiscal management responsibilities.

**Regional boundaries.** This factor addresses the extent to which the boundaries of the school system reflected the ethos of the communities it served. Hanson (1989) noted that in one successful program of decentralisation, boundaries were created "to encompass the social and economic requirements of territorial modernisation while still attempting to preserve cultural continuity" (p. 26). However, in another example of decentralisation, boundaries included socially and economically incongruent communities which exacerbated political activity, distorted educational decision-making processes, and accentuated organisational division.

In the study in Northland School Division, respondents in two of the three communities contemplating a further step in the decentralisation process are acutely aware of the socioeconomic and cultural diversity within the proposed 'regional boundaries.' Efforts are being made in planning their modern community-based education systems to bridge cultural and social differences and to preserve continuity of the dominant native culture. Nonetheless, the intended maintenance and promotion

of cultural values and priorities articulated by the visible treaty-Indian majority in each community will require sensitive management. Further, leadership ability to respect and integrate the cultural values of minority ethnic groups will be needed to ensure that a balance of wider community interests is represented in the design and development of a community-controlled education system. Although the chairman of Athabasca Delta L.S.B.C. emphasised that the new education system must be 'community owned' rather than 'band owned,' the perspective of a board member on the same L.S.B.C. was that "there's a lot of treaty [Indian] people on the board now, which is a true sign that we're moving ahead; we're getting the people to back us up." Conversely, the feeling of another member on this L.S.B.C. was clearly expressed:

There's very little representation really from the rest of the community.  
 . . . If the band people were to get together they would have the majority  
 in the school board, and all the decisions would be made with their aims  
 and goals in mind.

Central to the successful development of a community-controlled education system are the nature and the quality of representation on the L.S.B.C./Education Authority, within the designated regional boundaries of decentralisation.

In the Wabasca-Desmarais community, Mistassiniy L.S.B.C. respondents described a proposal to expand the current regional boundaries prior to embarking on the third stage of the decentralisation process. In planning a micro school division to encompass the seven Bigstone Band schools currently attached to the Northland School Division, educational leaders envisage the advantages of preservation of cultural identity and equitable funding arrangements because all of "the treaty kids in the seven schools are under the same tuition agreement." Again, management ability to respect and integrate the cultural values and priorities of the 40% nontreaty students attending Mistassiniy is needed to ensure that community control of education evolves not as "a white-native type thing, but as a community-based thing." The

importance of maintaining a balanced approach to community control of education is a particular challenge to some members of the L.S.B.C. because "if Bigstone Band wants to have both feet in the door instead of just one, . . . that could be a problem. . . . It would be very divisive. . . . It needs to be a give-and-take situation."

**Formalisation.** This factor refers to the extent of the "fit" between policy initiative and development and policy institutionalisation at the corporate and local levels. It was reported by Hanson (1989) that where management structures are not strong and well institutionalised (translated into organisational attitudes, values, beliefs, culture) in a decentralisation process, informal procedures, strong personalities, and faction priorities often dominate decision-making processes and program execution. Conversely, in a decentralisation process where organisation and management structures are institutionalised, the fit between policy and practice enables ongoing development through implementation of change initiatives.

This emphasises the necessity for L.S.B.C.s in Northland School Division currently pursuing the devolution of authority to control community education systems to establish sound management infrastructures so that a congruence of policy and practice and the institutionalisation of ongoing change initiatives are ensured. It appears to the researcher that the strong and well-institutionalised management structures established and developed by the Northland School Division Corporate Board of Trustees have enabled the implementation of many change initiatives which have addressed emergent priorities, served constantly changing boundaries, and encompassed a widening range of people and goals. This approach has guided the evolutionary development of a governance orientation which reflects contextual patterns and diverse cultural priorities.

### **Concluding Note**

It was concluded by Hanson (1989) that "changing the centralized patterns of the past is not easy; . . . however, it is certainly possible" (p. 27). According to the researcher's interpretation of the understandings and experiences of L.S.B.C. members shared in this study, the devolution of authority to three isolated, predominantly native communities in Northland School Division offers challenges unique to each community. Therefore, the further development of community-based education governance infrastructures must be guided by strong visionary leaders who can control local party politics and develop cross-cultural, contingency-management strategies which integrate identified needs of a local and increasingly widening society.

The findings in this study indicate that there is no blueprint for the development of L.S.B.C. trusteeship in three predominantly native communities in Northland School Division. Current endeavour by L.S.B.C. trustees to design and manage community-based education governance systems is challenged by conditions of dynamic complexity which demand constant attention and movement. Organisational goals and relationships are penetrated by the effects of interactive socioeconomic, political, and demographic forces which influence decision-making processes and ultimately shape systemic agendas and direction.

The adoption of a process approach to the development of administrative practice may assist governance architects to monitor the changing contextual specifics and variables within the community, integrate community and wider environment connections, and achieve ongoing organisational learning and growth.

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**Appendix 1**

**Letter to Superintendent, Northland School Division,  
Requesting Approval to Attend Education Committee Meeting**

**TO:** Mr. Colin Kelly, Superintendent, Northland School Division  
**FAX NO.:** 403-624-5914  
**FROM:** Nell Irwin  
**FAX NO.:** 403-439-4972  
**DATE:** September 23, 1992

Further to my meeting with the Steering Committee today and subsequent discussions with you and Donna Halabisky, I formally seek approval to attend the meeting of the Education Committee for a brief period on Thursday, 23 September 1992.

My purpose in attending the meeting is to seek the advice of the Education Committee regarding the possibility of undertaking a study in Northland School Division as part of my doctoral program in Educational Administration.

The insights experienced during my recent participation in the review of the concept of Area Offices in Northland School Division conducted by Duke and Associates and the valuable advice offered by members of the Steering Committee today confirmed my belief that a study which focuses on the achievements and aspirations of Northland School Division could be of mutual benefit to the Division and to the ongoing challenge for the aboriginalisation of school systems in Australia.

A particular area of interest is the regionalisation of the delivery of services and the subsequent challenge to administrators to identify and mobilise community-based leadership which reflects cross-cultural understanding and priorities.

Acting upon the authority of your verbal approval today, I have arranged travel via Time Air departing Edmonton at 0830 hours and returning to Edmonton at 1840 hours on Thursday, 23 September. Thank you for your positive interest and support.

Yours sincerely,

Nell Irwin

**Appendix 2**

**Letter of Thanks to Chairman of the Education Committee,  
Northland School Division**

11019 - 84 Avenue  
Edmonton, AB  
T6G 0V6  
Fax No. 403-439-4972

September 25, 1992

Mrs. Donna Halabisky  
Chairman, Education Committee  
Northland School Division  
c/o Fax No. 403-624-5914

Dear Donna:

Thank you for providing the opportunity for me to meet and speak with members of your committee yesterday. I was extremely encouraged by the positive response to my proposal, and I appreciate your support in presenting a recommendation to the Corporate Board on my behalf.

I have compiled a brief resume of my background, the area of study proposed, and the intended method of gathering the information in communities. I trust that it may serve to clarify some background to my request to undertake study in Northland School Division when the recommendation of the Education Committee is presented to the Corporate Board.

Many thanks for your assistance and support.

Yours sincerely,

Nell Irwin

Attach.

**Appendix 3**

**Supporting Statement for Recommendation by Education Committee  
to Corporate Board for Applicant to Undertake Study  
in Northland School Division**



To: Chairman, Education Committee, Northland School Division

From: Nell Irwin

Date: September 25, 1992

Re: Supporting Statement for Recommendation by Education Committee to Corporate Board for Nell Irwin to Undertake Study in Northland School Division

1. I have worked as a Superintendent of Schools in isolated aboriginal regions in the Northern Territory of Australia for 10 years and will return to this position at the end of 1993.
2. I am currently enrolled in a Ph.D. program in Educational Administration at the University of Alberta.
3. Recent participation in the review of the concept of Area Offices in Northland School Division conducted by Duke and Associates confirmed my belief that there are many similarities between Native education in Northland School Division and aboriginal education in the Northern Territory of Australia. These similarities include geographic isolation, regionalisation of the delivery of services, and the leadership challenge.
4. The Northern Territory (Australia) does not yet have a Native-controlled school jurisdiction but is trying hard to promote community-based leadership and management infrastructures. It seems to me that this is the way to build the bridge of cross-cultural understanding between the school and the community.
5. Therefore, I believe that a study which focuses on the achievements and aspirations of Northland School Division would be of mutual benefit to Northland School Division and the further development of aboriginal school systems in the Northern Territory, Australia.
6. In particular, I would like to find out how Northland School Division is developing community-based leadership through local school board trusteeship, parent involvement, and school-community programs.
7. To gather this information, I would hope to gain approval from local school boards to visit communities to talk to school trustees and parents. No surveys.

Thank you in anticipation of your consideration of the recommendation put forward by the Education Committee for me to undertake study in Northland School Division.

Yours faithfully,

Nell Irwin

**Appendix 4**

**Letter of Approval to Conduct the Study from  
the Corporate Board of Trustees**



*Northland* SCHOOL DIVISION No. 61

BAG 1400 9809 - 77TH AVE.  
PEACE RIVER, ALBERTA  
T8S 1V2  
TELEPHONE (403) 624-2060  
FAX: (403) 624-5914

OFFICE  
OF THE  
SUPERINTENDENT

File No: 104-Z99-A61  
October 28, 1992

FAXed to: 439-4972

Neil Irwin  
11019 84th Avenue  
Edmonton, Alberta  
T6G 0V6

Dear Neil:

I am pleased to advise that at the October 23-24/92 regular meeting of the Board of Trustees, your request to undertake study in Northland School Division was approved through Motion 17881/92 as follows:

**Father Paul Hemou moved that the Board of Trustees accept Neil Irwin's proposal for research on doctoral dissertation, subject to local school board committee approval.**

Your proposal dated September 25/92 to the Education Committee was attached to the recommendation to the Corporate Board as supporting documentation. As outlined in "7." of that proposal, it is our understanding that you will obtain local school board committee approval prior to visiting the communities and talking to board members and parents, and that there will be no surveys.

We wish you success in your endeavors, Neil.

Sincerely,

*Collin Kelly*

Collin Kelly,  
Superintendent of Schools  
Northland School Division No.61

**Appendix 5**

**Letter of Thanks to Superintendent**

11019 - 84 Avenue  
Edmonton, Alberta  
T6G 0V6

November 2, 1992

Mr. Colin Keen  
Superintendent of Schools  
Northland School Division #61  
Bag 1400  
9809 - 77 Avenue  
Peace River, Alberta  
T8S 1V2

Dear Colin:

Thank you for your letter of 28 October 1992 in which you advised that my request to undertake study in Northland School Division #61 was approved through Motion 17881/92 at the October 23-24, 1992, regular meeting of the Board of Trustees.

Naturally, I am delighted with this outcome in the firm belief that the study proposed will have both theoretical and practical significance for the further development of aboriginal local school board trusteeship.

Would you please convey my appreciation to the Board of Trustees for their consideration and approval of my application to work in Northland School Division #61.

Thank you for your personal assistance and support. I look forward to further liaison with you as I develop a plan for this study.

Sincerely,

Nell Irwin

cc: Education Committee,  
Northland School Division #61

**Appendix 6**

**Letter from Superintendent re Contacting  
Local School Board Committees to Gain Access**



*Northland* SCHOOL DIVISION No. 61

BAG 1400 9809 - 77TH AVE.  
PEACE RIVER, ALBERTA  
T8S 1V2  
TELEPHONE (403) 624-2060  
FAX: (403) 624-5914

OFFICE  
OF THE  
SUPERINTENDENT

File No: 104-Z99-A61  
November 2, 1992

Nell Irwin  
11019 84th Avenue  
Edmonton, Alberta  
T6G 0V6

Dear Nell:

Further to my letter of October 28/92 informing you of the Board's positive response to your request to undertake a study in Northland School Division No.61, I would like you, prior to your contacting local school board committees, to meet with Cora Weber-Pillwax, our Deputy Superintendent.

I understand that you and Cora have spoken, just briefly, about the formulation of your doctoral research question and that you were willing to discuss your research as there are possibly aspects and results that could, as Cora has said, "assist and enlighten us".

Please contact Cora at 1-800-362-1360 to discuss in more detail what you and her had briefly touched upon.

I wish you well in your studies and look forward to seeing you soon.

Sincerely,

Colin Kelly,  
Superintendent of Schools  
Northland School Division No.61

CJK/db  
c Cora Weber-Pillwax, Deputy Superintendent

**Appendix 7**

**Letters to Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent  
Submitting a Tentative Plan for the Proposed Study**



TO: Superintendent, Northland School Division #61  
 FAX No.: 403-624-5914  
 FROM: Nell Irwin  
 FAX NO.: 403-433-2536  
 DATE: December 16, 1992  
 RE: Tentative Plan for Study in Northland School Division #61

- Further to your advice of approval through Board Motion 17881/92 for me to conduct a study in Northland School Division and my subsequent contact with your Deputy Superintendent, Cora Weber-Pillwax, I herewith submit a tentative plan for the proposed study.
- As indicated previously, my objective is to focus on priorities which are of mutual benefit to the further development of Northland School Division and unresearched areas of aboriginal education in Australia and beyond.
- The purpose of the study is to find out how Northland School Division is developing community-based leadership through local school board trusteeship, parent involvement, and school-community programs.

- Research Question:

What are the processes by which local school board trusteeship is developed in eight communities in Northland School Division?

A number of more specific questions will address the following objectives:

1. to discover and to describe the kinds of learning/knowing experienced by local board trustees that motivate them to be leaders;
2. to discover and describe the local and global influences and processes which convince a native parent that he/she can be elected as a local school-board trustee;
3. to discover and describe the understandings of a native school board trustee of his/her local leadership responsibility;
4. to discover and describe how a parent/trustee, once elected, is able to reconcile local cultural priorities with wider educational standards and objectives; and
5. to discover and describe ways in which native school trustees organize themselves to ensure quality education for their children.

- Possible Sites:

Subject to the approval of local board committees, the Superintendent of Northland School Division, and principals, the following school communities have been identified as possible sites with transport accessibility in mind.

I understand that your Deputy Superintendent will assist me to obtain local school board committee approval to access communities.

Area 1:

Paddle Prairie, Cadotte Lake

Area 2:

Atikameg-Sovereign, Grouard

Area 3:  
Demarais (Mistassiniy, Chipewyan Lake, Calling Lake, Sandy Lake, Pelican Mountain)

Area 4:  
Fort Chipewyan, Anzac

- Data Collection

Observation - informal interviews - document analysis

With the consent of local school board committees, I would hope to visit communities at least three times to talk to local trustees about their understandings and experiences of school trusteeship. Approval to attend some local school board meetings would be an advantage.

- Tentative Schedule:

Due to teaching/course commitments, I have limited flexibility in terms of the block time periods available for travel, that is, February 16-26, 1993, and April 13-June 30, 1993. However, actual dates of visits to specific locations will, of course, be scheduled in accordance with divisional and school-community convenience.

- a. Orientation Visits to Communities:

February 16-26, 1993

Tentative dates:

Tuesday, February 16	- Fort Chipewyan
Thursday, February 18	- Chipewyan Lake
Friday, February 19	- Anzac
Monday, February 22	- Demarais (Mistassiniy, Sandy Lake, Pelican Mountain)
Tuesday, February 23	- Grouard, Atikameg
Wednesday, February 24	- Cadotte Lake
Friday, February 26	- Paddle Prairie

- b. On-Site Data Collection

April 13 - June 30, 1993

Ideally, during this period it is hoped that it will be possible to spend extended periods of time in each community. A schedule for this time period will be negotiated with respective communities-divisional authorities if and when approval to access is obtained during the orientation visit in February.

- As emphasized previously, this is a tentative plan. Naturally, I am anxious to observe protocol and to respect the convenience of the division. Therefore, I would be grateful for any advice and/or assistance that you and your staff can offer me.

Sincerely,

Nell Irwin

11019 - 84 Avenue  
Edmonton, AB  
T6G 0V6

December 16, 1992

Ms. Cora Weber-Pillwax  
Deputy Superintendent  
Northland School Division #61  
Peace River, AB  
T8S 1V2

Dear Cora:

Further to our telephone conversation of December 15, 1992, I attach a tentative plan for the proposed study of local school board trusteeship in approximately eight communities in Northland School Division #61.

Apart from the dates proposed for travel, which are fairly inflexible due to my commitments at the U. of A., the plan is tentative, and I would value your scrutiny of it and feedback in terms of observation of protocol, practicality, and, of course, the research focus.

Thank you for your assistance. It is very much appreciated.

Sincerely,

Nell Irwin

Attach.

**Appendix 8**

**Sample Letter to Chairman, Local School Board Committee,  
Regarding Proposed Study**

To: Chairman  
Athabasca Delta Community School  
Fort Chipewyan, AB TOP 1B0

Fax No.: 697-3604

From: Nell Irwin

Fax No.: 433-2536

Date: February 4, 1993

Further to my recent telephone conversation with you, I submit an outline for the proposed study in Northland School Division authorised through Corporate Board Motion 17881/92.

As indicated in my submission to the Corporate Board, my objective is to focus on priorities which are of mutual benefit to the further development of Northland School Division and unresearched areas of aboriginal education in Australia and beyond.

The purpose of the study is to find out how Northland School Division is developing community-based leadership through local school board trusteeship, parent involvement, and school-community programs.

Research Question:

What are the processes by which local school board trusteeship is developed in eight communities in Northland School Division?

A number of more specific questions will address the following objectives:

1. to discover and to describe the kinds of learning/knowing experienced by local board trustees that motivate them to be leaders;
2. to discover and describe the local and global influences and processes which convince a native parent that he/she can be elected as a local school-board trustee;
3. to discover and describe the understandings of a native school board trustee of his/her local leadership responsibility;
4. to discover and describe how a parent/trustee, once elected, is able to reconcile local cultural priorities with wider educational standards and objectives; and
5. to discover and describe ways in which native school trustees organize themselves to ensure quality education for their children.

- 2 -

With the consent of local authorities, I would hope to visit school communities at least three times to talk to school-community personnel about their understandings and experiences of school trusteeship. The opportunity to attend local school board meetings would be an advantage.

Following consultation with your Area Superintendent, yourself, and the principal of the school, I have made tentative arrangements to visit your school community February 9-11, 1993.

I would be grateful for any time and assistance you may be able to give me during the conduct of this study.

Yours faithfully,

Nell Irwin

cc: Principal, Athabasca Delta Community School

## **Appendix 9**

### **Sample of Personal Letter to Interviewees**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

I wish to thank you for your time and the information shared during our recent interview in your community. Attached is a copy of the transcript of our interview which focused on your understandings of the development of local school board trusteeship in your school community.

Please read the transcript thoroughly and consider whether or not the text conveys your intended meaning. Please feel free to clarify any of your responses and/or add to the text any other thoughts you wish to share. If there are particular comments that you wish to be disregarded in the reporting of this study, please delete those comments in the transcript copy.

Once again, I wish to assure you that every effort is being made to protect the identity of participants and the sources of information provided to me. Should you have any questions at any time regarding your involvement in this study, please feel free to call me at 439-4972.

Thank you again for your co-operation and assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Nell Irwin

Attach.



## **Appendix 10**

### **Sample Interview Guide**

### **Interview Schedule**

The researcher used the following interview guide to conduct *informal conversational interviews* and *unstructured interviews*:

- Tell me about your community.
- How long have you been a member of the \_\_\_\_\_ L.S.B.C.?
- Why did you decide to 'run' for election to the L.S.B.C.?
- Tell me about the 1992 \_\_\_\_\_ L.S.B.C. election.
- Why do you think you were elected to the L.S.B.C.?
- What are the things that are most important to you as a L.S.B.C. member?
- What are the influences in this community that affect you most as a L.S.B.C. member?
- What are the influences outside this community that affect you most as a L.S.B.C. member?
- What is your job as a board member?
- What are the qualities you like to see in other board members?
- Tell me about the Corporate Board governance function.
- How do \_\_\_\_\_ L.S.B.C. members organise themselves to make a difference to education in this community?
- Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about?

## **Appendix 11**

### **Sample of Letter of Thanks to Local School Board Committees**

August 17, 1993

Chairman, Local School Board Committee  
\_\_\_\_\_ Community  
Northland School Division

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

As my study of the development of Local School Board Committee trusteeship in three communities in Northland School Division is now nearing completion, I wish to thank you for allowing me to visit your community and talk with some board members about their experiences and understandings of the development of Local School Board Committee trusteeship.

This experience was both exciting and professionally rewarding for me, and I look forward to sharing the findings of the study with you in due course.

Thank you for your co-operation and assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Nell Irwin

cc: Principal, \_\_\_\_\_ School  
Area Superintendent