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# Action required to implement recommendations: families, lawyers demand

[STUDENT INQUEST](#)



Matt Vis, tbnewswatch.com

Bernice Jacob (centre), mother of Jordan Wabasse, speaks at a media conference following the conclusion of the coroner's inquest into the deaths of Wabasse and six other students from remote First Nations communities attending high school in Thunder Bay.

By Matt Vis, tbnewswatch.com

An exhaustive inquest into the deaths of seven First Nation students which produced 145 recommendations after months of evidence and testimony from hundreds of witnesses will be meaningless unless action is taken, lawyers representing the families argued.

The coroner's inquest into the death of the seven youth from remote communities, who died between 2000 and 2011 while each were attending high school in the city, concluded Tuesday with the jury's verdict read in front of a standing room crowd in the largest courtroom in the Thunder Bay Courthouse.

The recommendations, which are not legally binding, are directed to a number of different stakeholders including the federal and provincial governments, Nishnawbe Aski Nation, City of Thunder Bay, Thunder Bay Police Service, Northern Nishnawbe Education Council and the Matawa Learning Centre.

Christa Big Canoe, co-counsel for six of the seven families, called on the parties named in the recommendations to step up and make a change.

"If we don't actually do something with the recommendations all of these families will have spent nine months opening their hearts and showing the world their chests as they heart beat for no reason at all. They became very vulnerable and told not only the jury and the lawyers but the public about their children's lives, the way the children impacted the families and communities and education in general," Big Canoe said.

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"It is on the deaths of these seven youths that there is a watershed of change and we can never forget that. We have to give it meaning."

Six of the students – Jethro Anderson, Paul Panacheese, Robyn Harper, Curran Strang, Reggie Bushie and Kyle Morriseau were in Thunder Bay to attend the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council run Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School. The seventh student, Jordan Wabasse, came to the city to take courses administered through the Matawa Learning Centre.

The inquest opened last October and probed the circumstances surrounding the deaths of each of the youth as well as contributing structural and systematic factors through 146 witnesses and 185 exhibits. The jury spent much of the past month deliberating and drafting their recommendations after closing addresses were made in May.

The jury ruled the means of death for Panacheese, Anderson, Morriseau and Wabasse are undetermined while the deaths of Harper, Strang and Bushie were determined to be accidental.

"I just hope the recommendations are implemented and there is change for our students," said Maryanne Panacheese, mother of Paul Panacheese.

NAN Deputy Grand Chief Anna Betty Achneepineskum said the organization is prepared to act on the recommendations.

"Nishnawbe Aski Nation will commit to working with our First Nations, with our families and with the provincial and federal governments and all the agencies that have been named to ensure the recommendations are implemented," Achneepineskum said.

"We will commit to that because we owe it to our children. I can't stress that enough, that our children are depending on us to make sure these recommendations are all implemented and that when they come to school here in September they come to a safe environment and one where they will be able to succeed in their educational endeavours."

Among the recommendations is the urging of Ottawa to drastically improve First Nations education, including reducing and eliminating the educational gap between the provincial school system and First Nations schools within 10 years.

The jury charged the federal government to move ahead with the construction of a student residence in Thunder Bay, with shovels in the ground next spring.

A number of the recommendations direct the federal and provincial governments to address shortcomings in First Nations education, as well as on-reserve conditions in Nishnawbe Aski Nation territory.

They include providing sufficient amounts of funding to allow First Nations schools to provide a full range of programs and services, creating a new stable, predictable funding formula based on student need, ensuring education facilities are properly equipped with adequate educational and extracurricular resources and having sufficient staff and support workers available in schools.

NNEC counsel Etienne Esquega said the recommendations could represent a landmark in First Nations education if they are implemented.

"It seems like everything has been boiling for a while and now it's really come to a head," Esquega said.

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"We're hopeful Canada and Minister of Indigenous Affairs (Carolyn Bennett) will honour the mandate letter which says we need to improve the relationship, we need to address these issues. It's been going on for far too long."

Government is also urged to address housing shortages in NAN communities and to take action to remedy water treatment, waste water and poverty issues in those communities while working to create economic development opportunities.

The jury also made a number of suggestions to improve the experiences of the students while they are in Thunder Bay.

That includes calling on the city to increase the accessibility and awareness of programs and opportunities and working with First Nations organizations to provide orientation for students before they arrive to attend school.

Thunder Bay city manager Norm Gale said the recommendations will be reviewed by administration and council.

"One of the roles of city leadership is to ensure we're a welcoming community and that everyone in our city and community is felt to be part of this community," Gale said.

"Certainly the city is enthusiastic about making things better for everyone. We have heard the recommendations and we'll begin work on that and see where it goes."

In addition, the jury called for an immediate safety audit of the river areas where students have frequented in the past with possible measures including improved lighting, installing barricades under bridges, adding poles with emergency buttons and increasing the frequency of police patrols.

It was also recommended a memorial for the seven students be constructed in the city in collaboration with their families, with memorial scholarships also established.

NAN lawyer Julian Falconer said the significant costs of the eight-month inquest compel provincial and federal agencies to make the recommendations worthwhile by making them reality.

"It's high time the auditor general federally and the auditor general provincially track the implementation and make sure the public are getting value for their dollar," Falconer said.

Josh Kakegamic, the brother of Morriseau, read a statement from his father that mentioned how a younger sibling is planning to attend high school in Thunder Bay starting in September.

"He has a strong, brave heart of hope and courage given that he lost his older brother when he left home for school," he said.

"He reminds me there is faith and hope for all of us to gain knowledge and education when he and other First Nations children leave their families and loved ones and their home communities to learn, to improve their lives and to create opportunities for themselves."

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