



BIMOSE

MEDIA RELEASE

PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT CONTINUES TO DENY ANISHINAABE SCHOOL

Ontario Ministry of Education and Kenora school boards continue to deny tuition for successful urban First Nations school

KENORA, ONTARIO, May 8, 2017 - Kiizhik School in Kenora continues to be refused tuition payments for its off-reserve students despite a 200% increase in students and an exemplary two year track record.

Kiizhik School was founded by Bimose Tribal Council in 2015 and is the first urban Anishinaabe school in Ontario. The school followed the successful launch of Bimose Community High School in 2013. Kiizhik provides classes for Anishinaabe students in Kenora and the surrounding area who live both on and off reserve. Kiizhik receives tuition for students who live on reserve. Kiizhik has made repeated requests to receive tuition payments for students who live off reserve from the Ontario Ministry of Education and through a “reverse” tuition agreement with local school boards without success.

“Kiizhik does not discriminate between on-reserve and off-reserve students. It was founded on the belief that all Anishinaabe caregivers within our homelands are entitled to educate their children in accordance with our language and traditions” said Charlene Mandamin, Chairperson of Bimose Tribal Council who own Kiizhik School. “However when off-reserve students choose to attend Kiizhik, our school doesn’t automatically receive tuition because of Provincial legislation. It’s frustrating because these parents and caregivers pay education taxes to Ontario like everyone else.”

Kiizhik has been repeatedly challenged with roadblocks when requesting tuition payments for its off-reserve students. Tuition bills for off-reserve Anishinaabe students attending public or catholic schools are automatically paid by the Ontario government. However, if an off-reserve Anishinaabe student attends Kiizhik, Ontario legislation dictates that local school boards may redirect the student’s tuition to the First Nations school via a reverse tuition agreement. A school board may also refuse to enter such an agreement but receives no financial benefit. The tuition payments are simply retained by the Ontario government and remain unpaid.

In 2016, a provincial inquest following the deaths of several First Nations teenagers in Thunder Bay recommended that school boards not be allowed to refuse reverse tuition agreements in order to make it easier for off-reserve students to attend a First Nations school.

"Many of Kiizhik’s students are off-reserve, meaning we can only receive their tuition payments if a local board agrees to transfer their tuition” said Mandamin. Kiizhik approached both Kenora area school boards. “Both boards have refused our request and as a result we are forced to provide our educational services with 70% of what a comparable school would receive. Without these tuition funds, off-reserve students are not able to access additional support such as specialized assistance and busing that other schools take for granted.

The shortfall over our first two school years is over \$1 million in total. These funds would have gone directly towards support for our children.”

In response to legislative impasse, Kiizhik had developed a pilot project proposal to Ontario to create a short-term alternative funding source for its off-reserve students. This proposal was also rejected.

Kiizhik stands less than a kilometre away from the site of the former Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School where many tragedies took place. The school believes that again there are rights violations occurring via the jurisdictional wrangling and the ongoing resistance Kiizhik is facing.

“Kiizhik represents a fundamental change in urban First Nations education where being Anishinaabe is celebrated and children’s hope is restored. The success of our school is undeniable. Children are fully immersed in our language and traditions and our high school students are graduating at an unprecedented rate. It’s sad that in an era of reconciliation we need to battle for something as fundamental as the education of our children.” Said Lorraine Cobiness, Chief of Ochiichagwe’babigo’ining Ojibway Nation. “Ultimately, it appears that the only solution is for First Nations to assert their jurisdiction over education and create a level playing field for all children.”

Despite these challenges, Kiizhik School will continue to grow, expanding grades every year and accommodating all caregivers & children who wish to participate in the successful model. Kiizhik is looking towards the future and is currently initiating plans for a new high school.

Chief Cobiness stated. “When it comes to our children, failure is not an option.”

ABOUT KIIZHNIK:

Bimose Tribal Council purchased and renovated a former Catholic elementary school in October, 2014. The project was financed using First Nation assets as equity with no government subsidies involved.

The vision of Bimose’s Elders and leaders was to establish an Anishinaabe school to teach and practice its culture, language, and traditions in an academic setting. The elementary school, Kiizhik GaKino’amaawadiiwi’gamig, is the first urban Anishinaabe school in Ontario. Anishinaabe prayers, songs, language and traditions are built into the curriculum. Monthly pow-wows and feasts involving student families are common.

In its first year, Kiizhik’s enrolment was 20 students with an attendance rate over 95%. In its second year, the school expanded to add additional grades as its student body progressed. Enrolment has since grown by over 200%.

Kiizhik has been visited by over 15 organizations from across Canada and one organization from Australia. The school is considered an exemplary instructional model.

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