

MINUTES

**COLDWATER BAND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MEETING
NICOLA-SIMILKAMEEN SCHOOL DISTRICT (NO.58)**

**COLDWATER SCHOOL, GYM
MONDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2026, 5:00PM**

Success for ALL Learners Today and Tomorrow

Present:	Chairperson	G. Swan
	Trustees	J. Chenoweth D. Rainer J. Kent-Laidlaw E. Hoisington
	Superintendent	C. Lawrance
	Assistant Superintendent	M. Sheldon
	Secretary Treasurer	M. Friesen
	District Principal of Indigenous Education	A. McIvor
	Director of Instruction – Inclusive Education & Early Learning	A. Moulard
	Executive Assistant	S. Chenoweth
	Executive Assistant	K. Buckland

Questions from the Public

Sunny Oppenheim - Have you thought about renting out Central?

Chair Swan's response – That is one option. If we were to sell the property, the proceeds would be placed into capital funds. If instead we leased the building, the revenue would help offset operating costs. Currently, Scw'exmx Child & Family Services leases the Kengard building, and a church rents part of the CMS building. Our CLC and SCIDES programs are also based out of CMS.

Gerome Garica – Before your closure decision is made, what concrete decision will the board and the ministry put in writing to protect students' mental health, special needs, supports and cultural continuity to ensure the Coldwater student will not be split up.

Chair Swan's response – If you notice that none of the options are to split up Coldwater students, or any of our bus students. One of the options is to close Central school and move the entire school as a whole to the current Collettsville school. We've previously supported students through significant disruptions, including fires that displaced learners and, more recently, the flood that required us to relocate from three campuses to nine within just two weeks. NVIT provided space during that transition, and that experience has strengthened our ability to respond quickly and effectively in emergencies.

Regarding mental health needs, when the recent tragic incident occurred at Bench, we immediately deployed our critical response team to support both MSS and Bench. We have well-established processes and experience in providing timely mental-health support following traumatic events.

Superintendent Lawrance's response – We also have a program called Open.Parachute, which supports social-emotional learning. We recognize that many of our students have mental-health needs, which is why this program is in place. It is also why the board funds a significantly higher ratio of counsellors than we are required to provide. While none of the current options are ones we prefer, closing a school would help us continue funding these counselling positions that directly support student well-being.

As Gordon mentioned, we have different levels of response depending on the situation. During crises or critical events, we deploy a support team immediately, often drawing counsellors from across the district to ensure students and staff receive timely assistance. Mental health concerns are a major consideration in this entire process, and one of the primary reasons the board is exploring a potential school closure—if we do nothing, we will have to reduce services due to shrinking budgets tied to declining enrolment.

On the cultural side, significant improvements have been made in recent years. When families self-identify as Indigenous, additional targeted funding is generated. The Indigenous Education Council now advises on, creates, and approves the budget for how these dollars are allocated. Although the budget has seen a slight reduction as overall enrolment drops, it remains strong, and representatives from all local bands and the Métis community sit on the council.

These reductions to services would only occur if the district does not close a school, because the savings would have to be found elsewhere. Regarding students with designations or special needs, some categories generate ministry funding while others do not. We are trying to avoid cutting seven EA positions next year. Unlike teachers, EAs do not have the same contractual protections around staffing levels. We currently have approximately 68–69 EAs, which is a high number for a district our size, but reflects the level of support our students require—and that we are committed to maintaining.

Betty Ann McDonnell – Not sure if you have heard this yet but neurodivergent children do not do well with change. And on top of it, we're talking about cultural difference. In Central, these kids are comfortable with who they are. They know where everyone is. They know where Martha is. Again, you're making a huge change in their lives, and I don't hear what your plan is for that.

Chair Swan's response – The Board, as you know, has the 4 options. One of the options is Collettsville moves to Central and Central stays there and then we absorb the maintenance cost. There is also the option to move Central to Collettsville, Collettsville to Diamond Vale. The Board hasn't made a decision. There is don't do anything and cut staff, I actually think we need more counselors not less.

Superintendent Lawrance's response – I can speak about the transition process in general. It would be like when our kids are transferring from our elementary schools to MSS, we start the process early. Sometimes as early as April, with getting them familiar with the building. It involved coming around, seeing where everything is, making connections there. Sometimes we're able to move EAs with them from the elementary to secondary. We wouldn't have that issue in this case because some of our EAs feel more comfortable in elementary rather than a secondary level. We would look to move as many staff, if that's the option the Board chooses, with them as possible. There are some factors that are simply outside our control due to collective agreements, but we recognize how essential consistent staffing is for students. We would also host open houses so families can visit the new site, because even long-time Merritt residents may not have been inside all of our schools. These are some of the general

practices we use to support students, particularly those who are neurodivergent and struggle significantly with change.

In many cases, students may visit the building multiple times, sometimes even joining a class for a short period so they can experience what the environment is like. These are some of the transition supports we routinely put in place to help make the process as smooth as possible.

Betty Ann McDonnell – It sounds wonderful in theory, and it may work well for some children, but it certainly wouldn't work for one of my son's brothers. Visiting the school in April might help certain students, but for others, it would be overwhelming or even frightening. So, that's not an answer to me.

Open houses also don't help children like mine. Those events are loud and busy—people talking, kids running around—and that kind of environment can be extremely overstimulating. My child would likely be overwhelmed, possibly screaming or panicking, which could upset others as well. For some children, especially those who are highly sensitive to noise and change, these strategies simply aren't effective support.

Cheryl Rule – What's the timeline for the Board to make a decision?

Chair Swan's response – The Board will make their decision at the March board meeting and the reason for that is we are tied into collective agreement language. If we were to choose to layoff staff, we need to do those by May. We also need to give the district staff time once the Board chooses one of the 4 decisions so that they can look at reconfiguration the schools. Also, we're aware under the BC Tripartite education agreement for these standards with reaching out to both Coldwater and Upper Nicola as they are rights holders.

During the flood, we approached the Ministry with a proposal: rather than spending money on partial repairs—such as the interior work completed from four feet down while leaving the wiring and boiler rooms untouched—we asked whether the funding allocated for Diamond Vale and Central could instead be combined to build a new Central School on the existing site. The Ministry reviewed the idea for two weeks and ultimately determined it would require an additional \$20 million, making it unfeasible.

One of our priorities has always been exploring ways to preserve a school on that property. Another option the Board is considering is investing approximately \$2-plus million into maintaining the current Central building. However, doing so would redirect the majority of our annual facilities budget toward a single aging structure. The Ministry does not have an "evergreen" policy that automatically replaces schools once they reach 60, 80, or even 90 years of age. We have raised this issue repeatedly over the years without success. Growing districts continue to receive funding for new schools, which affects rural districts like ours.

We continue to advocate for government to treat rural communities differently. As buildings age, the cost to maintain them eventually exceeds the cost of constructing a new one, and this reality needs to be recognized in funding models. So far, those concerns have not resulted in policy changes.

We have explored possibilities such as raising the current building—given the 1.5-metre crawl space beneath it—and placing it on a slab to extend its lifespan. If the building were only 10 years old, there likely would be no discussion about Central at all. These are the complex considerations the Board must weigh across the four options: determining what makes sense for students, for staff, and within the financial constraints of a balanced budget. We're anticipating a further decline of about 71 students next year. For comparison, enrolment dropped by 51 students two years ago and by 49 students last year. We haven't had the staff working on a particular scenario that will be improper until the Board actually comes up with a decision.

Gerome Garica – How are the Coldwater's Local Education Agreement (LEA) and school of choice to Central impacted, especially with the Current bus driver shortage and changes.

Chair Swan's response – Right now, if we were to move a bus route it would be between Quilchena and Douglas Lake, it wouldn't be the Coldwater bus route. The LEA, we have responsibilities in that because it's a legal agreement with us and the Band on how we work with children. One of the biggest things that we talk to Bands and to the District Principal of Education, Angela McIvor, is around attendance.

At some of our meetings, a few parents suggested that we start charging additional fees for students to ride the bus. The Board has been clear that we will not do that. We are not going to charge students to attend school or to access transportation. That is our Board policy. While some community members disagree with this position, we believe it is important to uphold.

Gerome Garica – How is the District making sure that the language class is being held as the same standard as other courses? Instead of being treated like an easy class.

Superintendent Lawrance's response – Part of our work with the language program has involved addressing significant staff turnover in recent years, which has made it difficult to retain a teacher for a full year. To strengthen the program, we now have a seasoned teacher working with our language instructors two days a week, providing support with lesson planning, classroom management, assessment, and overall instructional practices. Because many of our language teachers are working under a Letter of Permission and have not completed a traditional teacher-education program, this mentorship is a substantial investment of time and resources—but it is already paying off.

We are seeing increased confidence in both teachers and students. At our recent winter celebration, students used their language proudly, and even in the hallways they are beginning to respond in the language. It is no longer confined to a single classroom; we are moving toward a more immersive experience.

This mentorship model has been one of our biggest successes. It mirrors the work of our literacy and numeracy coaches, who provide direct in-class support to teachers because we see tremendous value in that approach. Our long-term vision is to have Indigenous language programs in every school in the district. We are not there yet—primarily due to staffing shortages—but we are actively cultivating local talent to help build stability and keep instructors in the community.

We take this work seriously. While the program may not always have appeared rigorous in the past, we are intentionally moving toward a stronger, more structured, and more sustainable model.

Stephanie Archie (Central Parent) – I have a question about transportation. Correct me if I'm wrong but I think I got a notice about bus driver shortage. Was there going to be a route that is going to either be cancelled or discontinued?

Superintendent Lawrance's response – I can speak to the bussing piece. First, it's important to note that the recent bussing notice was entirely separate from the school-closure discussion. The message was sent because we've had several bus-driver resignations on both sides of the district, and with cold and flu season in full swing, staff absences can quickly leave us without enough drivers to cover all routes.

Last week, for example, we had to combine the Quilchena and Douglas Lake routes to ensure every area still had service. Our priority is always to keep the morning and afternoon routes running; however, field trips during the day may be affected when staffing is short.

Part of the reason we shared that communication is because we are actively recruiting new drivers. If you know someone who might be interested in regular or relief bus-driving work, we are always seeking applicants.

Again, this situation is separate from any potential school closure. Based on where Coldwater families live, busing would continue regardless of which option the Board selects, due to our walk-limits policy and transportation requirements. We understand the letter caused concern for many families, that's why we wanted people to be aware of the possibility of cancellations ahead of time rather than being surprised by a morning notice.

Part of our planning included asking each community which school they would choose if their current school of choice were no longer available. If a school closes, and that school has been designated as a family's school of choice, we need to know which alternative school they would select. As Gordon mentioned, this information carries significant weight for the Board because it can influence which scenario they ultimately consider—whether that means no school closure, or one of the three alternative configurations.

We recently held a consultation meeting in Lower Nicola, where Chief Lindsay from Shakan attended. One key point he raised was the importance of the Nicola 5 and the school district coming together collectively to lobby the government for funding. This aligns with why I sent the earlier letter: during our LEA renegotiations this summer, Chief Lee asked for a list of areas where we need support advocating to the province, and Lower Nicola requested the same information. His point was that a unified voice—multiple communities speaking together—would likely be far more effective.

As you noted, the issue fundamentally comes down to funding. We are doing everything we can to maintain services with a shrinking budget, and Indigenous leadership often has greater influence in advocacy than the district alone. While the Board and I regularly lobby for increased funding, unified advocacy from Indigenous communities tends to gain more traction and attention from government.