

MINUTES

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

**N'KWALA SCHOOL LIBRARY  
THURSDAY, JANUARY 29, 2026, 5:00PM**

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*Success for ALL Learners Today and Tomorrow*

Present:	Chairperson	G. Swan
	Trustees	J. Chenoweth D. Rainer
	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. Mouland
	Executive Assistant	S. Chenoweth
	Executive Assistant	K. Buckland

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**Questions from the Public**

**Wayne McLeod (Band Member)** – I’m curious to what the other bands are saying. Because it could cause have a ripple effect.

**Chair Swan’s response** – At the meeting last night, Chief Lindsay of Shackan Indian Band said he would support whatever both Coldwater and Upper Nicola Indian Bands ask for. Because it is not directly affecting their kids. If we did nothing then that would affect Nicola Canford, but they’ve said they’re going to honour your wishes. He says that as the Nicola 5, I want to know what Coldwater wants, I want to know what Upper Nicola wants and that’s what I’m going to support.

**Deb Manual (Band Member)** – How is the school district taking into consideration the trauma, stress, anger, and emotional impact that students, families, and staff have already been experiencing — including the effects of COVID, flood, and now the uncertainty around school changes — especially for young students in programs like French Immersion who are worried about their education and stability?”

**Chair Swan’s response** – When we talk about the French Immersion program, we want to be clear that the program is not being closed. The intention is to move the entire program intact so that students stay together and so we can rebuild a dual-track model. Many parents have told us they are unhappy with the current triple-split classes, and because we are funded strictly based on the number of students, small class sizes in one school end up forcing larger class sizes in another. We simply no longer have the financial capacity to subsidize those smaller class sizes — over the last two years alone, we have lost more than \$1,000,000 in annual funding, and next year we are projecting another significant decrease if enrollment continues to decline.

Given these realities, moving the whole French Immersion program together is part of trying to balance student needs, class composition rules, and limited funding — all while keeping the learning community intact.

We also fully recognize the concern you raised about trauma, stress, anger, and the emotional weight that students, families, and staff are carrying. The impacts of COVID, flood, and now the uncertainty around school changes are very real. We know that many children, including very young French Immersion learners, are already feeling worried about what will happen to their education, their language program, and their friendships. Those concerns matter deeply to us, and they are part of why we are trying to move the program as a whole rather than disrupt the relationships and stability students rely on.

We are also aware of broader issues — including racism expressed in some spaces — and the demographic context of schools, such as Central's student population being approximately 68% Indigenous. These realities make it even more important that any transition is handled thoughtfully and respectfully, with the wellbeing of students and families at the center.

**Superintendent Lawrance's response** – We have seen a decline in students for many years, and historically we've always been below the provincial average (for achievement). After COVID, this wasn't unique to us — it was a province-wide trend, and overall results dropped significantly. What we're seeing now is that results fell into a valley and are only slowly beginning to recover.

We have been working on several fronts to support students, especially in the area of social-emotional learning. This is why we have coaching positions in place — to help teachers build capacity and strengthen the skills students need to feel safe, regulated, and ready to learn. There is a specific reason we have teachers coaching other teachers: there are real gaps in instructional practice and capacity that we are actively addressing. Similarly, there is a reason the Board has kept a higher-than-required ratio of counsellors, even though the provincial expectation is one counsellor for every 693 students. We know our communities have gone through repeated trauma — fires, floods, COVID — and we haven't had a five-year stretch without a major traumatic event. Our students simply need more support.

However, low enrolment is putting real pressure on the system. The smaller a school becomes, the fewer services we can provide — both district-wide and within that school. Larger schools allow us to base more supports directly in the building. With fewer buildings, counsellors would spend less time traveling and more time working directly with students. Our goal is to maintain our current level of counselling services because we are finally seeing meaningful progress in classrooms due to the work between teachers and instructional coaches. Even the union and the district, despite not agreeing on everything, agree that these efforts are making a real difference.

Our concern is that if we do not consolidate, we will be forced to cut services — and our kids are already struggling. The choice becomes: do we keep every building open, or do we protect the supports that students urgently need? Another challenge is the cost of maintaining aging infrastructure. Although it isn't shown on this particular slide deck, our previous presentation noted that for every dollar that comes into the district, nearly 15 cents is spent on building maintenance alone because older buildings are more expensive to keep running. Over the past 20 years, about \$6.5 million has disappeared from our budget due to declining enrolment. For a long time, we were able to cushion this with healthy reserves, but those reserves are now gone. We cannot run a deficit — unlike federal or provincial governments — so we must live within our means.

That is the core issue we are facing. We know our kids need support, and we want to meet them where they are. But with the current system, we simply do not have the resources to maintain all buildings *and* provide the programs and services our students require. Something has to give — and the choice comes down to staffing or buildings.

**Chair Swan's response** – So, if we have that extra dollar we can keep those 4 teaching positions, the 2 counsellors, and I actually think we need more counsellors, or we can put that money into a principal or secretary. I'm just one voice, but I'd rather see that going into protecting our teaching positions with a direct service to our student.

**Trustee John Chenoweth** – Do you know the size of Kengard? What is the capacity of that building?

**Superintendent Lawrance's response** – I believe the building has approximately five classrooms, but I'm not certain of its full capacity. I will need to confirm that information with our operations manager. What I do know is that its capacity is smaller than Central, which means we would not be able to move students there. In addition, the building would require substantial upgrades to be converted back into an elementary school.

**Secretary Treasurer Friesen's Response** – That is the same concern with the CMS building, as it was originally constructed as a junior high school and is not outfitted to function as an elementary school.

**Chair Swan's response** – If Central were only ten years old, we wouldn't be having this discussion. The government does not follow an evergreen approach, meaning they don't automatically replace schools once they reach 60 or 70 years of age. I've had parents say, 'I went to that school in 1942,' and I'll respond, 'Yes, you did.' Some elders tell me that today's students say the building isn't the same school their grandparents attended, while other elders—older than I am—share that it wasn't always a happy place for them. Central students have said, 'Keep us together; do not split us up.' That's why an important part of this presentation focuses on how we can keep students together — because it matters to them. We also know that if we realized we'd made the wrong decision, we could reopen the building within two weeks. During the flood, staff were given two weeks over the winter break to figure out how to create nine campuses. Using MSS, Diamond Vale, and Central, we were able to turn those three campuses into nine.

**Wayne McLeod (Band Member)** – Other than the lower mainland, are there other district that are seeing the declining enrolment? I think, in what you're explaining to us, is what is happening to the old band office here. It costs too much to do upgrades, so we have to build a new one.

**Chair Swan's response** – During the flood, we approached the Ministry with an alternative idea. Instead of spending the insurance funding to restore Diamond Vale and Central—since insurance only brings buildings back to their previous condition—we proposed using those funds to build a new school on the Central property. The newest part of that building dated to the 1960s, and the oldest to 1936, so restoration would not result in a modern structure. We suggested constructing a new building on the Central site and raising it approximately three metres to address one of the key issues revealed during the flood. This option would have required roughly an additional \$20 million, as a new school of this size we were considering was estimated at around \$34 million. The government considered the proposal for a couple of weeks but ultimately declined. When we talk about other districts experiencing declining enrolment, this is the first time in my 30 years as a trustee that I've heard Surrey report a net loss of students. Surrey grew by roughly 1,200 students per month at one point, and later by about 2,000 students per year. This year, however, they lost 1,200 students — many moving to Alberta. A big factor was the unintended impact of the government capping immigration, which had been a major source of their student growth.

So, for the first time, a district of roughly 74,000 to 76,000 students saw a decline. As a result, they had to cut \$18.6 million from their current year's budget just to make things work. And while Surrey is much larger than we are, we're seeing districts of all sizes face similar challenges. For example, Penticton closed three schools last year. Part of the issue is that governments still tend to view education as an expense rather than an investment. But we know that when you invest in education, you create pathways to good-paying jobs, whether through skills and trades or post-secondary programs. This, in turn, supports things like food security because families have stable incomes.

My son works at Kamloops Regional Corrections, and they can tell you the academic levels of their inmates. Many have not completed Grade 10, many have not completed Grade 12, and very few have any post-secondary education. We also know that investing in education helps reduce long-term healthcare costs.

Government has seen these numbers over the years, yet the quick response often becomes cutting or withholding investment—something we've also witnessed in healthcare. We almost had to see our hospital close before government acknowledged there was an issue, even though some of us saw the signs 20 years ago. We do not want education to reach that same crisis points. But that becomes a much bigger conversation about how government chooses to invest in our kids' futures.

**Superintendent Lawrance's response** – To add to the conversation about declining enrolment, in rural and remote districts like ours, we are experiencing a steeper decline than both the Ministry projected and what we had anticipated in our own forecasts. Much of this is tied to global economic shifts and changing demographics. We did not see the 'COVID baby boom' that many expected, and very few districts in the province grew this year. Kamloops and Kelowna had been steadily increasing their student populations year after year, but for the first time, Kelowna contracted — their enrolment came in lower than what they had budgeted for. They do still have reserves, so they can manage the shortfall, but it represents a significant shift from their usual trajectory. Kamloops is also down this year.

And these are major, fast-growing centres. In rural regions like ours, the long-term trend is even more pronounced. This isn't unique to B.C.; we're seeing similar patterns in rural Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. We also face very different economies of scale compared to larger districts in the valley — everything costs more to operate, maintain, and ship here.

Another challenge is the age of our buildings. Because they are so old, parts often need to be custom-fabricated, which comes at a significant cost. Last year, when a component of the HVAC system at Central failed, Gordon had to approve a \$68,000 invoice because the part had not been manufactured since 1968. We had to find someone who could custom make it, as replacements simply don't exist anymore.

**Deb Manual (Band Member)** – How is the final decision going to be made and who is the one making it?

**Chair Swan's response** – The final decision will be made by the Board of Trustees, as this is their responsibility under the School Act. We've had people ask whether the community gets a vote, but the process does not work that way. We are gathering input from parents, the community, and the City, but ultimately the Board must make the decision—that's what they were elected to do. They will be making that decision at the March Board meeting.

There is a petition circulating that asks us to delay the decision for a year. However, delaying simply pushes the issue onto a future board and makes the situation even more difficult to resolve. The Board is reviewing the four options and determining which course will be best for the district. If, during consultation, a new idea emerges that we haven't considered, we are absolutely open to examining it.

This process has also given us the opportunity to clarify misunderstandings. At one meeting, someone suggested cutting full-time librarian positions at each school. We explained that we actually have only one full-time librarian—at MSS—and all other libraries are staffed by part-time teachers who also teach classes. This was new information for that individual, who had assumed every school had a full-time librarian.

We've also heard questions about the Assistant Superintendent and Secretary-Treasurer positions. I've been a trustee for 30 years, and we have always had an Assistant Superintendent. The Superintendent and Secretary-Treasurer positions are required by law. When the districts were amalgamated, the role previously held by Ritchie Gauge, Director of Instruction, became an Assistant Superintendent position due to the increased size of the district.

Some people see a new name and assume the district is adding positions. That isn't the case. For example, when Jane retired, Misty moved into her role. When Dylan became a band manager, Mark stepped into Dylan's former position. These were vacancies being filled, not new positions being created. This consultation process has allowed us to explain these details, so people have accurate information.

**Collette Sunday (Band Administrator)** – I'm wondering whether the Board plans to narrow down the four options, and if you might consider reducing them before gathering further feedback. For example, if you were to put out a poll with a clear timeframe for responses, you could better understand what the community prefers.

However, we would also need to determine who would be eligible to participate in that poll — would it be only parents from the affected schools, or a broader group? I'm also wondering whether you would consider using a poll after the Board makes its decision, so families have time to adjust before the end of the school year. Rather than waiting until May—when there are only a few weeks left before students finish school, introducing the decision earlier could help families prepare for what September will look like. That way, the transition would be smoother for parents and students, and people would have time to understand and adjust to what the changes will mean.

**Chair Swan's response** – We will make the decision in March, at the March Board meeting. We have the school closure email, so people can send that information in. Legally, the Board has to make that decision because we will have some people say, well, we get a vote. And we have to run a balanced budget. I believe the mayor was on CFJTV and said, well, they just need to run a deficit for a year. We're not allowed to run a deficit under the School Act. We must balance our books each year.

**Superintendent Lawrance's response** – In response for narrowing it down, we've had that request before because this is the way the process is set up, the Board has to consider all scenarios, going into the March meeting. So, narrowing it down could give the impression that a decision has already been made.

**Collette Sunday (Band Administrator)** – How many Board members are there?

**Chair Swan's response** – There are 7 Board members. There's one rural, three in Princeton and 3 in Merritt. Once the Board makes a decision, that will give the staff the direction on what to do. Then they'll have April and May to figure out. But parents will know the night of March 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Collette Sunday (Band Administrator)** – I didn't see it or hear it, but if you do close Central, do you think that property would be sold?

**Chair Swan's response** – Not necessarily, that's one of the things people have said, just sell the property and use the money for your operating budget. We're not allowed to do that. If we sell the property, the money goes into a capital reserve fund, which can't be used for operating. It can only be used for capital purchases. It could be used for renovation another building. So, there is no real advantage to selling it. If we're wrong, we would still have the building to move back into fairly quickly. If we're able to rent that space out to someone, the lease payment would be put into operating. If we were to sell it, it's about a 4-year process. We would go through a process to reach out to 1<sup>st</sup> our rightsholders. If they're not interested in the property, then reach out to regional government, then reach out to corporations and then to the public. If we sell it, we can't use the money for operation. And if we did use it for operating, it might only cover for 2-3 years.

**Collette Sunday (Band Administrator)** – What about the school buses? How many students actually ride the bus, and are they an appropriate size of bus that are running for all the rural areas?

**Chair Swan's response** – We are reviewing that. For the Quilchena and Upper Nicola bus route, we are within about three students of being able to operate a single bus. One challenge is that when parents register for busing, we are required to ensure a seat is available for every registered student. We've been examining whether there is a more efficient way to manage this. We also have some students in Nooaitch, and through our contract with Shackan, they pick up those students and bring them to Nicola-Canford, which is a more efficient arrangement.

**Superintendent Lawrance's response** – This is the challenge we're facing. Not only are our school populations declining, but the number of students riding the bus is also shrinking. We receive only about \$170,000 for transportation, yet we operate with a deficit of nearly \$800,000. Last year, we looked at the possibility of collapsing one of the bus runs, but at that time we still had too many students. We expect that by next year we may be below the threshold and able to operate a single bus route more efficiently. Our fleet is also aging. Previously, buses were replaced every eight years, then the cycle shifted to twelve. Now, with so many buses across the province due for replacement, districts only receive a new bus if it is over twelve years old *and* past the mileage limit. We're unsure what the criteria will be next year, but we do know that the older a bus gets, the more maintenance it requires. We are also struggling to recruit and retain bus drivers, which adds another layer to the challenge.

**Wayne McLeod (Band Member)** – I'm curious as to how the non first nations people are adjusting to what's being asked.

**Chair Swan's response** – Collettville wanted their own school, that's not dual track and its own French students to stay put. I'd say that's a pretty fair assessment. I'd say as the watering hole has gotten smaller, we're seeing more racism coming

up, which maybe we should have predicted, but we're just seeing that. I hear comments in town about the number of indigenous businesses. I'm thinking, you should be happy, those businesses are renting those storefronts and creating commerce in the community.

**Deb Manual (Band Member)**– What if our students don't want to move up to Collettsville or Diamond Vale but instead go to Bench?

**Chair Swan's response** – Bench wouldn't be an option right now because it is already operating at 104% of its capacity due to the number of portables on site. What we need to know from your council is which school you would prefer as your school of choice. All our nations have the ability to choose which catchment school they want to attend.

**Tim Manual (Band Member)** – I'm curious in regard to the populations of indigenous population of Central and Diamond Vale.

**Chair Swan's response** – Central is about 68.5% Indigenous and Diamond Vale is about 55%.

**Tim Manual (Band Member)** – Just a thought, we have an important opportunity here to bring as many Indigenous students together as possible, which would allow us to strengthen the LEA, focus on Indigenous programming, and ensure the right supports and resource people are in place.

Years ago, there was hesitation about concentrating Indigenous students in one school because of concerns about segregation or labeling, and those perspectives are still important to acknowledge. But this moment also presents a chance to rethink how we support students — to design a model that intentionally builds cultural learning, community connection, and the goals we want to achieve through the LEA. It could also give parents and students meaningful opportunities to grow, learn, and connect with their culture in ways that may not have been possible before.

**Trustee John Chenoweth** – We had some parents ask, Why doesn't the District think outside of the box and have an Indigenous school. There could be a French Immersion school and an Indigenous Land school in the same space.

**Casey Holmes (Band Member)** - When we gather in this space, we're told it is a safe place — a place where people can speak openly and from the heart. I've listened to what you've shared, and I understand that sometimes you're told to bring your concerns elsewhere or ask someone higher up.

We also need to recognize that many of the limits we face come from the system. Often, the people in the middle — the ones you see here — end up receiving the frustration or anger, even though they are also answering to others. So, I try to understand what is within your control and what isn't, and I appreciate when that is acknowledged. The challenges aren't just about individuals; the system itself creates many of the barriers.

What I'm hearing are two parallel perspectives: the wellbeing of our students, and the reality that students also represent funding that follows them. When conversations shift toward money, it raises an important question: are we viewing students as human beings, or as funding allocations tied to certain spaces? That's something we all need to reflect on. I've been hearing there's 176 First Nation students in the district school district.

**Superintendent Lawrence's response** – Our overall Indigenous population is about 40% for the District.

**Secretary Treasurer Friesen's Response** – We had 776 self-identify.

**Casey Holmes (Band Member)** – How much money does a student bring in?

**Superintendent Lawrence's response** – It's about 11,800 in our district. So, there's a base amount, about \$9000 some geographical funding in there. And then we have a number of students who have designations, which brings in some additional funding if they're low incidence. So, it works out to about \$11,800 per student. And then we have additional dollars that are specifically targeted for indigenous students, which goes to supporting our indigenous student advocates, positions, other cultural programs as well.

**Collette Sunday (Band Administrator)** – Has there been an official correspondence that came from the school district to Chief and Council to say, we are going to be having a vote on March 11<sup>th</sup>, and we would like your feedback before this date?

**Secretary Treasurer Friesen's Response** – I sent an email to all Chiefs, and we had a Chief's meeting on the 19th as well. We also had the education coordinators that were invited to that meeting.

**Collette Sunday (Band Administrator)** – In scenario one, you talk about what the impacts would be on year one and year two, what happens after that?

**Chair Swan's response** – More cuts. Our projections show that over the next eight years, our student population will continue to decline. The impact depends on how quickly that decline happens. If we have around 71 students next year, that represents the loss of approximately three to four teaching positions, depending on class sizes. If we were to lose 100 students, and you estimate roughly 22 students per teacher, that would amount to nearly five teaching positions, possibly slightly fewer. That's the reality we're facing, depending on where enrolment lands. In Option 1, we may see more split classes, reduced counselling services—despite that being an area where we believe additional support is needed—and the loss of resource teachers who provide instructional coaching to staff.

**Superintendent Lawrance's response** – The medical system is putting additional pressure on our schools because there are not enough mental health resources available. When services are stretched, that pressure shifts onto our individual bands and our schools. The reality is that there simply are not enough mental health professionals, and we are one of the few districts still maintaining an above counselling ratio because we recognize our communities face unique challenges. There has been significant trauma here for many years, and especially over the last five. We want more counsellors, not fewer — but right now we don't have the funding to increase those positions, and we are working hard just to maintain the services we currently have.

From my perspective, the main advantage of closing a school is that it would allow us to sustain the supports students urgently need. Without consolidation, we will eventually be forced to reduce those services in order to keep multiple buildings operating. The downside, of course, is the emotional attachment to these buildings and the deep history they hold.

Ideally, we would keep every school open, but that simply isn't possible moving forward. So, if the choice is between preserving services or preserving buildings, I personally would lean toward protecting services for students. We see the impact every day. Our goal is to provide more support, not less.

**Deb Manual (Band Member)** – I noticed that you don't have any information on Princeton.

**Chair Swan's response** – Princeton is stable in their population. They've gone up a little bit. They're about a quarter of the student that we have in Merritt, but their population's been staying stable. They have a younger population there as well. In the fall we did have Princeton in the presentations, it showed both ends of the district. In Princeton we closed Tulameen and Riverside schools.

**Tierra Holmes (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** – This situation has created stress on both sides of the district. We have had resignations across both sides of the District, leaving us short of bus drivers. The biggest impact right now is on field trips—we may not always have enough drivers available. With cold and flu season underway, if too many drivers call in sick, we may not even have enough to cover our regular routes. We wanted to give everyone advance notice that this is a real possibility.

Last week, for example, one driver was sick and we were only able to cover the Douglas Lake and Quilchena routes by combining them. We didn't have to cancel either route, but it required picking up all students on a single bus. We will always do everything possible to avoid cancelling a route; that is our last resort.

However, with enrolment continuing to decline, we may eventually need to consolidate routes for efficiency. As our numbers shrink and as our fleet and staffing pressures continue, combining those bus routes may become necessary.