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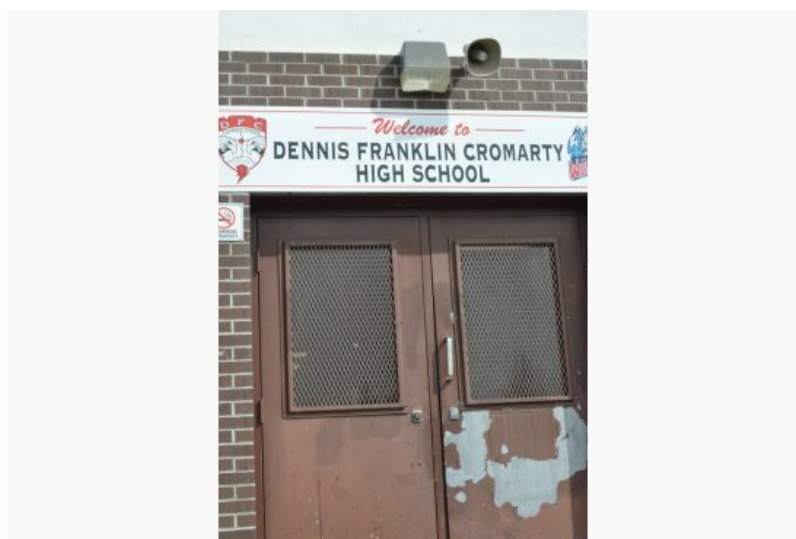
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News / Canada

Thunder Bay high school is home away from home for First Nations students, inquest told

Each student at Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School is part of a community and their safety and care is entrusted to the school, said principal Jonathan Kakegamic.

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TANYA TALAGA / TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

About 100 kids from remote, northern Ontario reserves attend Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School in Thunder Bay.

By: **Tanya Talaga** Global Economics Reporter, Published on Wed Oct 07 2015

Jonathan Kakegamic, the principal of Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School, goes to sleep every night fearful that his phone will go off and he'll be told one of his students is missing.

It happened just last weekend, Kakegamic told a coroner's inquest looking into the deaths of seven First Nations students who left their remote northern communities to attend school in Thunder Bay.

Six of those students — Paul Panacheese, 21, Kyle Morrisseau, 17, Robyn Harper, 18, Curran Strang, 18, Reggie Bushie, 15, and Jethro Anderson, 15 — were students at Kakegamic's school. The seventh, Jordan Wabasse, 15, attended the Matawa Learning Centre. The students died between 2000 and 2011.

The majority of the 140 students attending Dennis Franklin come from First Nations reserves in the Sioux Lookout district of Ontario. They travel alone, hundreds of kilometres from their parents, to obtain a high school education because their communities don't have adequate secondary schools.

The inquest, presided over by Dr. David Eden, heard there are only five high schools (most go only to Grade 10) serving 23 First Nations communities in northwestern Ontario — an area about one-quarter the size of the province.

The students who want an education beyond Grade 10 have no choice but to leave home. Many of the students who attend Dennis Franklin Cromarty board with Thunder Bay

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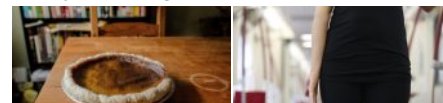
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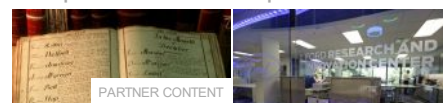


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families. The inquest also heard there is a lack of funding to support these students away from home.

Each student at the high school is part of a community and their safety and care is entrusted to the school, Kakegamic said. Many of the teens have never been to a large city before and they are not used to living on their own.

Last weekend, the high school's 24-hour team who checks to make sure every student is home at curfew, alerted Kakegamic at 2 a.m. that two students were missing.

When he saw the text, Kakegamic told the inquest that he and 10 members of the school community set out to do a search.

"The female showed up but not the male. It was his first time here," said Kakegamic, who was moved to tears recalling how stressful that night was. He called the teen's mom to ask her if she knew if her son knew anyone in Thunder Bay.

"We were out there until 4:30 a.m. You do what you can because the parents trust you," he said, adding the situation ended well as the boy eventually turned up.

That is what life is like at Dennis Franklin Cromarty, said Kakegamic. Everyone on staff — from the teachers to the receptionist to the custodial staff — pitches in to help. The kids are also fed three meals a day at the school. There is a quiet room where students can visit a community elder, grab some bannock and some tea. There is also a program on the premises that helps teens deal with prescription drug addiction issues.

"We are well above what a school can offer. There is a difference when you look after your own. As a principle, my job isn't 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. I'm on the clock until the kids (are) home. I can say that for all of my teachers . . . These students don't go home to mom and dad," he the inquest.

Dennis Franklin Cromarty is inspected yearly by the education ministry and just last school year, nearly 20 kids graduated. That number is growing every year.

"My door is always open," he said.

The inquest is scheduled to continue until March, 2016 and hear from 200 witnesses.

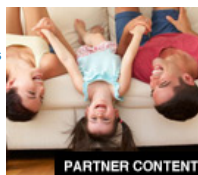


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