

## First Nations student deaths inquest: 5 things Nishnawbe Aski Nation wants

More support workers, money for student travel would help keep students safe, NAN says

By Jody Porter, [CBC News](#) Posted: Feb 08, 2016 6:45 AM ET Last Updated: Feb 08, 2016 6:45 AM ET

Young people from remote First Nations who are attending high school in Thunder Bay, Ont., need more help to stay safe, according to the Nishnawbe Aski Nation.

The lawyer for the treaty organization, representing 49 First Nations in northern Ontario, recently made several suggestions for improved student safety at the inquest into the deaths of seven First Nations students in the city.

Meaghan Daniel was questioning Norma Kejick, the director of the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council. It operates the Dennis Franklin Cromarty First Nations high school in Thunder Bay, where six of the seven youth who died were students.

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Kejick testified that the school receives thousands of dollars less funding per student than provincially-run high schools.

The students, who live in boarding homes, hundreds of kilometres away from their parents, need additional support, she said.

Here are five things the lawyer for Nishnawbe Aski Nation suggested would improve student safety:

- **1. Dedicated funding to send home-sick students to visit their parents**

Currently the school only receives funding for student travel at Christmas and the beginning and end of the school year. The school year begins in August.

"That first semester is the longest one with no break for them to go home at all," Kejick says.

According to evidence at the inquest, at least one of the students who died told his parents he wanted to come home just days before he disappeared in Thunder Bay.

He was last seen drinking with friends near the McIntyre River, where his body was later found. His death is unexplained.

- **2. More student support workers**

Kejick said support workers at the school 'have a high case load' of 20 to 40 students each.

The support workers help the students navigate both their academic life and their life in the city.

- **3. Education about racism for First Nations students coming to the city and for city residents**

Several former students who testified at the inquest said food, bottles and racial slurs were thrown at

them from passing cars in the city.

"I think we need more awareness about this," Kejick said. "We're hearing it over and over again from students and it's like we're normalizing it. It's not normal."

- **4. A crisis fund for times when students go missing**

The school runs at a deficit every year and there is no extra funding for emergencies, such as overtime for staff when they are searching for a missing student, Kejick said.

- **5. A dedicated staff person to keep parents up to date about their child's school and social life**

Kejick said there is a position within her organization for a communications coordinator but the job has gone unfilled.

The money for that position is being used elsewhere in the organization for student services, she said.

If parents chose to move to the city to support their child at school, the student is deemed not "ordinarily resident" on reserve and the First Nations school receives no funding at all, Kejick said.

The inquest continues on Monday when the principal of the First Nations high school is expected to testify.

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