

Jury of student death inquest issues 145 recommendations



By Matt Vis, tbnewswatch.com

After months of evidence and testimony from hundreds of witnesses, a coroner's inquest into the deaths of seven First Nations students has returned 145 recommendations.

The five-member jury delivered their verdict into the inquest of the students from remote First Nations communities who died between 2000 and 2011 on Tuesday morning in front of a standing room crowd in the largest courtroom in the Thunder Bay Courthouse.

The recommendations, which are not legally binding, are directed to a number of different stakeholders including the federal and provincial governments, Nishnawbe Aski Nation, City of Thunder Bay, Thunder Bay Police Service, Northern Nishnawbe Education Council and the Matawa Learning Centre.

Among the recommendations is the urging of Ottawa to drastically improve First Nations education, including reducing and eliminating the funding gap between the provincial school system and First Nations schools within 10

years.

Six of the students – Jethro Anderson, Paul Panacheese, Robyn Harper, Curran Strang, Reggie Bushie and Kyle Morriseau were in Thunder Bay to attend the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council run Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School. The seventh student, Jordan Wabasse, came to the city to take courses administered through the Matawa Learning Centre.

The inquest opened last October and probed the circumstances surrounding the deaths of each of the youth as well as contributing structural and systematic factors. The jury spent much of the past month deliberating and drafting their recommendations after closing addresses were made in May.

The jury ruled the means of death for Panacheese, Anderson, Morriseau and Wabasse are undetermined while the deaths of Harper, Strang and Bushie were determined to be accidental.

Strang, Bushie and Morriseau were found dead in the McIntyre River while the bodies of Anderson and Wabasse were recovered from the Kaministiquia River. Panacheese collapsed unexpectedly inside his mother's house with no determined cause of death while Harper was found dead in her boarding home due to alcohol poisoning.

A number of the recommendations direct the federal and provincial governments to address shortcomings in First Nations education, as well as on-reserve conditions in Nishnawbe Aski Nation territory.

They include providing sufficient amounts of funding to allow First Nations schools to provide a full range of programs and services, creating a new stable, predictable funding formula based on student need, ensuring education facilities are properly equipped with adequate educational and extracurricular resources and having sufficient staff and support workers available in schools.

Government is also urged to address housing shortages in NAN communities and to take action to remedy water treatment, waste water and poverty issues in those communities while working to create economic development opportunities.

The jury also made a number of suggestions to improve the experiences of the students while they are in Thunder Bay.

That includes having the building of a student residence and calling on the city increase the accessibility and awareness of programs and opportunities

and working with First Nations organizations to provide orientation for students before they arrive to attend school.

In addition, they called for an immediate safety audit of the river areas where students have frequented in the past with possible measures including improved lighting, installing barricades under bridges, adding poles with emergency buttons and increasing the frequency of police patrols.

It was also recommended a memorial for the seven students be constructed in the city in collaboration with their families, with memorial scholarships also established.

Paul Panacheese: 21. Nov. 11, 2006. No known anatomical or toxicological cause of death. Undetermined.

Robyn Harper: 18. Jan. 13, 2007. Acute ethanol toxicity. Accidental

Jethro Anderson: 15. Nov. 11, 2000. Drowning. Undetermined.

Curran Strang: 18. Sept. 26, 2005. Drowning with ethanol intoxication. Accidental.

Reggie Bushie: 15. Nov. 1, 2007. Drowning, ethanol intoxication. Accidental.

Kyle Morriseau: 17. Nov. 10, 2009. Drowning, ethanol intoxication. Undetermined.

Jordan Wabasse: 15. May 10, 2011. Drowning. Undetermined.