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Community groups, board closer to agreement on school program

By Matt Bellan
of The Leader-Post

The board of education and community groups have moved closer to an agreement on a community schools program.

The board met with representatives of eight community organizations Thursday night to discuss the program, designed to improve education in poverty-stricken, largely native areas of the inner city.

After three hours of talk, the two sides had only two issues left to settle, according to Gary Wouters of the board of education, the meeting's chairman.

The first involves the role community school councils, representing residents and organizations in the neighborhood, will play in selecting staff for the program, targeted for Kitchener and Connaught Schools.

The second involves deciding on a constitution ensuring community groups have a say in other details of running the program once it starts.

Representatives of the board, the department and the community groups will meet within the next few days to discuss the outstanding issues, Wouters said. He hopes to have a final draft of the agreement ready for the board's ap-

proval a week from next Tuesday.

The program, to be paid for by the board of education, is designed to improve students' achievement by getting parents and the rest of the community involved in school activities.

It also involves hiring teaching aides and other extra staff to support teachers and helping develop native and other course materials suited to students' needs, among other things.

The board of education is the last of six urban Saskatchewan school boards still to reach a final agreement with the department on the program.

Thursday's meeting was held at the request of the community organizations of the community schools' working committee, an umbrella group of native and non-native groups that started discussing the program after the department announced plans for it last spring.

In a position paper tabled Thursday, the organizations said they have a number of concerns about the proposed community schools agreement between the school board and the education department, and they're upset they weren't consulted in the early planning stages.

Debate centred around how much of a role community groups should have in staffing and running the program.

The board last week approved a

clause giving community residents the right to make "recommendations" about staffing.

The organizations Thursday asked the board to replace that with a clause saying residents of the community would be "actively involved in the staffing procedures of the board," saying they know the community best.

Trustee Eric Crosbie disagreed, saying that according to the Education Act, it's the board's duty alone to hire staff.

The organizations also asked the board to provide written agreements guaranteeing consultation with community school councils, made up of parents and other local residents, on running the community school programs.

Mary Hicks, board chairman, said the proposed community school councils and similar existing groups can act as advisory groups, but they can't be guaranteed special rights of consultation that aren't granted other school taxpayers.

She also questioned how representative the groups at Thursday's meeting were of the community.

Donna Pinay, representing Regina Native Women, answered: "I could say how representative of the community is the board?"