

Department's new school program for natives gets mixed reaction

By Matt Bellan
of The Leader-Post

Spokesmen for Saskatchewan native organizations have mixed reactions to a the department of education's new community schools program, a project aimed at reducing dropout rates in poverty-stricken urban areas.

The department of education last spring sent native and other organizations a discussion paper outlining the program in detail.

It will operate out of schools in neighborhoods with high native student enrollments. The program aims at improving students' performances through increased parent and adult involvement in a variety of community-oriented school programs.

Wayne Mackenzie, education spokesman for the Association of Metis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan (AMNSIS), says his organization so far hasn't discussed the program.

It's focused its attention instead on starting up the Gabriel Dumont Institute, a research centre for native culture that will be working on native curriculum development, he says. It's also been involved in planning a native teacher training program the institute will run, and holding province-wide elections.

AMNSIS will, however, be looking at the government's other new education initiatives for natives, including the community schools program, at an education conference it's holding this September.

Mackenzie says McArthur deserves praise for taking new initiatives in native education, but organizations like AMNSIS should have more say in planning the programs, contracting them out to local native service groups to run.

Ida Wasacase, education spokesman for the Federation of Saskatchewan In-

dians, says she has little comment about the province's education initiatives for urban natives because "McArthur's plans don't affect us that much."

"We're not responsible for urban education. Our primary responsibility is to the bands. We have 110,000 children in 132 Indian communities. There will be a time when we'll move into urban centres. We'll move in when our chief says we can do so."

Rhoda Fisher, a spokesman for Regina Native Women, a local service organization, says her organization only got

the community—that white people will be more vocal and that the concerns of native people will go unheard."

Theresa Stevenson, spokesman for Native Community Awareness, a service organization in the Albert School area, says despite the fact the program has the word "community" in its title, "I've yet to see where they've gotten the community to make plans."

Her group attended the department's meetings with school boards and neighborhood organizations discussing the program. One "was a very hot meeting. We asked why the community wasn't involved in picking the schools."

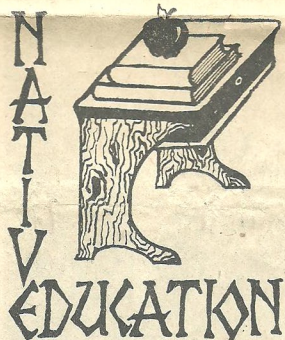
Responding to native organizations' concerns about a lack of consultation, the department's Wouters says: "There has been a consultation process. We can be open to some degree of criticism, but the program is evolutionary."

The basic concepts for the community schools and other programs attacking urban poverty were developed by the provincial government's social planning secretariat over a two-year period, he added. During that time, the secretariat did consult school boards and native groups.

There are vehicles for further community input into the community schools program as school boards develop it in detail.

As for criticism that the community schools program doesn't focus enough on natives, Wouters says the department has shown its concern about involving natives in education planning in several ways.

It's provided finances for the Gabriel Dumont Institute, for example. The institute's responsibilities include, among other things, developing educational programs and materials on native culture and running the teacher training program for urban natives.



the department's community schools discussion paper in May and hasn't really had time to analyze it or inform the community about it.

She adds, however, that local native groups have some concern about the program focusing on the community as a whole.

"There's some concern that natives are being lumped with other people in