

## **Minutes: Question-and-Answer Session**

Shortly after the Session 1 meetings, many attendees gathered in the gymnasium requesting the format for the public meeting be changed. Superintendent Mark Liguori agreed. Bill Suter, the principal of Ministik School, informed the group how the question-and-answer format will work. The following captures what was discussed.

**Bill Suter:** For many in our community the format for tonight wasn't working. So, Mark is being flexible and we are going to change that. What we are going to do is have Pauline and Diana—who have already worked on this—ask some questions that he will answer. And, we will be talking about the format for next Wednesday's meeting. Because we are well into the night we will have the two people ask their questions.

**Parent Comment:** There will be some questions that don't get answered tonight. We are going to try to ask questions that we feel will cover most of your concerns and try to answer other questions afterwards. Our committee heads, if they can ask their most important that they would like answered. We'll be asking about budget and lots of general questions as well. I understand Mr. Liguori you may not be able to answer everything on the spot here tonight and we will do our best to be respectful.

**Parent Question:** What financial savings will the Division see if Ministik closes given it has one of the lowest operating costs?

**Mark Liguori:** Relative to the operation cost, I think there's a lot of information about that that's perhaps not accurate. Certainly, from the Division perspective, we do not agree with that statement. When we look at the costs for operating the facility and operating the school it is significant compared to other Elk Island Public Schools.

**PQ:** We understand we have some higher costs per student in regards to staffing but in regards to other operation costs we were the lowest at \$90,000 in operating costs. So is it mostly staffing costs bringing our cost per students up?

**ML:** If you just choose certain numbers, that's what comes out. For example, when you look at that cost you quoted in addition to all the other costs to operate the facility—such as water, sewage, lights, garbage pick-up, etc.—what you'll find, is that Ministik actually is one of the highest, if I'm not mistaken, the highest per square metre.

Part of the issue—and why you wanted to be here and talk and I will gladly stay here as long as you wish tonight. Part of the frustration I believe, is that you want to have an exact figure. And, part of that reason you want to have that figure is so that it makes sense. So, if we come up with \$3.80 or \$3.85 you can say what the increase costs. I will gladly answer as many questions with the caveat that we will get the answers recorded and get the accurate information to you. So that we have the people that are

involved—transportation, facilities, etc.—be able to provide that. We will get these questions down, get the information out as quickly as possible, and we'll get it back to you. Some cases the turnaround will be very short, other cases it may take a day or so to get to you. But we will get it to you. Again, quoting figures is very difficult.

**PQ:** What policies or guidelines does EIPS have for determining if a school should be closed or not? Are there policies for determining if a school is, so called, viable? And, what guidelines are there?

**ML:** Policy is set by the Board contained within board policies. Administrative procedures is contained within administrative procedures and developed by the superintendent. Relative to the question you've asked the specifics around school closures are within those policies and procedures. The notion around school closure, or consideration around school closure, is part of the deliberations and obligations a board takes when it looks at the operations of the entire school division. And, it takes a look at what are those factors around why there is a difference between revenue and expenses. When a Division is using its surplus dollars to support its day-to-day operations there does come a point when that is unsustainable.

**PQ:** So it's more of a subjective process and not about if a school is not functioning at a certain cost per students? It's a subjective process that considers all matters?

**ML:** In fairness to the school division we would never put it down to the cost per student. That's not how we operate. It's not how the Board of Trustees operates. We look at the total picture and look at all 42 schools within the Division and take into consideration the funding. That's what the Board and administration contemplates.

**PQ:** I'm part of the community impact committee and something that was brought to us for anyone who owns property in the area was the value of our property. And, I think that's something for all of us who live in this community and area it should be addressed because we did talk to a realtor who said it will drop our property values if the closest school is 26 kilometres or 30 kilometres away. So I have an issue with the fact that my home that I moved to a year and a half ago—and that I was OK with moving this far because the school is so full—could now possibly drop in value because of what eight or nine people make a decision on where my kids get to go to school. And, their decision will have an effect directly on our lives. I struggle with that.

**ML:** What I would say, is relative to the real estate values I can't speak to that. I believe that it would be very difficult to put a relative value on the real estate value. Having said that, again the figures that you have quoted to 26 kilometre to 30 kilometres, for example, Fultonvale is 16 kilometres, but I think some of those questions we won't ever be able to address.

**PC:** Mr. Suter read in an email, the first little part of an email and it was actually my mother-in-law who wrote that, and it really hit it on the head:

"To the Elk Island Public School Board, I am the grandmother of a young man who attends Ministik School. I have had four sons who attended schools in two provinces in Canada and two

in Europe and I have never experienced anything like the community that has both educated and embraced my grandson. He has excelled in all areas of his personhood and I attribute a lot of that to the positive hours he spends at school. His teachers encourage him scholastically, socially and morally. Ministik offers a quality that we rarely find in our society, 'belonging.' An example of this was at the recent school dance in which students, families and staff could be found interacting on much more than a superficial basis. To close this school is a shameful commentary on how children and families are valued less than the financial bottom line. Our goals as educators should be to develop 'whole' people not just to push students through the system. Trust me, by herding children together and neglecting their personhood you will continue to reap the dysfunction you are sewing. I am pleading with you as one who is watching the decline, please save this safe haven."

**PQ:** If current enrolment at Fultonvale is listed at 447 and optimal enrolment is listed at 552, you take all of our Ministik kids and take all the other rural kids, what is the proposed enrolment for Fultonvale for the next five years? And, how do you plan to accommodate all these children? If you have many more children you won't have room at Fultonvale, you are going to need portables, which is ironic.

**ML:** To answer your question accurately, the full build out at Fultonvale school is 700 students. So that's the maximum capacity of Fultonvale. That was part of the modernization rebuild plan of the school.

**PQ:** What is the difference between optimal enrolment at 552 and the utilization of the space at Fultonvale versus the capacity at 700? Is that taking into account portables that you're going to need eventually?

**ML:** The full build out at Fultonvale, with the addition of four modular, would mean 700 students.

**PQ:** On the EIPS website, you have a list of optimal enrolment numbers. You have 552 for Fultonvale. How do you come up with that number? And, how if Ministik kids go there and Wye kids go there, you're going to get a lot more than 552, how are you going to accommodate our children?

**ML:** And a very fair question. So we take a look at optimal enrolment limits. Optimal enrolment limits are a process we use in a conversation between principals and our planning department to look at how many students they believe they're able to accommodate within these schools. The capacity of the school is different than the optimal enrolment because there are spaces in schools that can be used as learning space.

You also asked the question about infrastructure and what they use for a percentage of occupancy. So you'll often see a variety of numbers. The easiest thing to look at is simply this: What is the capacity of the school as determined by Alberta Education? This helps us see how many students we are able to accommodate at capacity.

In relation to Wye Elementary, certainly our board has, under its Three-Year Capital Plan and the Ten-Year Facilities Plan, put forward to the province of Alberta that Wye Elementary be replaced with a replacement school with grade configuration. It did make it on the sunshine list, which means it's being considered but there's been no confirmation from the province yet. The notion, when Wye school moves to a new site, which is supported by the capital plan, it would no longer accommodate the

students that currently attend Wye is not true. The school is meant as a replacement school, which means those students who attend Wye school who wish to attend Wye school will do so.

**PQ:** They are moving that school all the way to Heritage Hills, so that children who live in county residential areas, why should they be forced to go all the way to Heritage Hills? The closest school for them would be Fultonvale.

**ML:** That would be a choice that parents could make. We talk about “being all that way” and we are talking about a few kilometres. The reason for the modernization at that school is simply because of the situation currently at Wye Elementary where we still have a rural school on a site in a very urban region....and we are grateful to the province for granting a new school and the Board for making it a priority.

**PQ:** My understanding is there’s an issue with adequate gym times at Fultonvale with the existing number of students at the school right now. How will you accommodate extra students and accommodate required gym times for them as well?

**ML:** So, parents I would say is simply this, it’s not something that has been brought to my awareness or the associate superintendent’s. Certainly, it’s something we will get back to you about.

**PQ:** We looked at the report to the Board and see that the schools are ranked by cost per student. And, it’s our understanding the cost per student isn’t the consideration here?

**ML:** When you take that report in isolation, it’s simply one way that we are able to report to the Board that information. One of the key pieces—and again we could be talking about two separate things, and if we are I apologize—when you take a look at the school status report, contained within the school status report and the reason why we have that is because it also shows Small Schools by Necessity Funding. Very few schools within any school division, but because we are talking about Elk Island, very few school within Elk Island receive that specific funding. And, that’s why that report looks as it does.

**PQ:** If we are financed with the small school funding we’re close to average. Is this an important consideration in the cost per student because I heard tonight cost per metre and we haven’t come across that yet?

**ML:** What it comes down to is the fundamental decision by the board and administration. In that administration makes sure we give the Board the very best information. So that when they take a look at the total envelop of funding the Board can see that we are able to make sure, or ensure, that we have operations of our Division within the fiscal realities.

I know you will get tired of hearing me say this but we can no longer continue to fund day-to-day operations out of the Division’s allocated surplus. It cannot happen. And it cannot happen simply because the Board in its wisdom, through the administration, has determined that two per cent of our total allocation from the provinces so \$200 million—two per cent is \$4 million. It’s the threshold for that that allows us to save for that never worry rainy-day fund. To drop below that significantly imperils the Division if we have a significant issue that we need to remedy and that can be negative. We need to be fiscally prudent.

**PC:** When we look at the numbers we don't look bad on paper. We'd like a chance to work on the numbers to impact them positively because we want to keep our school open. And, stuff is happening in the budget that we don't have control over and if we could impact that positively than lets go for it by making some changes so the school looks better on paper so we can keep it open.

**PQ:** It's been our understanding at the school at Ministik that the motion was put forward because of health and safety—especially the portables and the lead in the water. Are we going to believe that it's now about money? Or, is it about the portables? We have been approved for the funding for the portables, am I correct in saying that?

**ML:** Absolutely correct.

**PQ:** We had looked at replacing the waterlines on our own dime, not on yours. Yet, you still talk about this being a financial responsibility of yours and the Board's. My question to the Board is in your mission statement it says that you have a responsibility to the parents. These are parents that are standing up for their school, where is your responsibility? Above that, the synonym of responsibility is liability. Are you guys being personally liable for this decision you are making? Because it doesn't seem like you guys are thinking or listening to us. And, it pisses us off.

**PC:** I know some of you still have questions. But I believe the format for the meeting is probably not working that well. We have provided the district with all of our questions. They are going to work towards answering those. I understand your frustrations here but it's probably a bad situation right now to continue with asking questions in this format. I want to respect the forum and in time we'll have to finish it off.

**BS:** Thank you Diana. I know there are more questions and Mark is going to stay. So if you want to go over and talk than that's fine. Next week, we'll be back here and administration will have had the opportunity to look at the great list of questions, come back with answers, we'll be able to hear those answers and ask more questions at that time. I suggest, if you have questions for Mark, you make your way up. Thanks you very much for coming out tonight. Your support is incredible.

**PC:** I just have one thing to say. This is from someone who closed a school in Ontario. The guy is now a member of parliament and his name is Marcus Ryan. This is what he wrote and I only had one chance to read it, in the red room: "Ontario has the grass roots community trying to save their rural schools because Ontario is closing its their schools he said 'funding boards primarily based on enrolment, and then giving them capital funding when they close schools is explicitly forcing school boards to close small rural and build large urban schools...the funding formula is old and lazily written and doesn't distinguish between the geographic and demographic diversity of Ontario.'" So that is what is happening here.