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The Honourable Karen Casey
Minister
Department of Education
P. O. Box 578
Halifax, NS
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Dear Minister Casey:

RE: SCHOOL REVIEW PROCESS DISCUSSION PAPER

I would like to thank you for consulting with municipalities on the process for reviewing schools and school closures and including a UNSM staff member on the working committee tasked with developing the discussion paper.

Schools are an important aspect of our communities and are valued by municipalities. They provide a community gathering place, integral to the social and learning fabric of a community.

Municipalities recognize that schools must meet the needs of the students, first and foremost, but school structures are also community assets, built by and for taxpayers. Municipalities contribute a significant amount to school board budgets—almost 18 per cent. If municipalities are expected to provide this level of funding, they should have a say in the decisions around school infrastructure. Municipalities believe the role schools play in community sustainability must be considered.

Our members have raised the issue of surplus school disposal at our last two annual meetings, and have passed the following resolutions:

- *That the province assume full responsibility for all existing public schools, regardless of when the building was constructed*
- *That municipalities receive notice of surplus schools prior to disposal so they can determine if there is a municipal purpose that would justify buying the property from the school board*
- *There should be sufficient funding to assist in the potential redevelopment or demolition of a school building including environmental remediation costs*
- *The process should include situations where the educational structure is taken over by more than one municipal unit.*

The discussion paper goes beyond the specific issue of surplus schools and generally captures the issues and concerns of municipalities. UNSM supports the goal of improving the planning, consultation and decision-making process in ways that are good for students and communities.

While each municipality has been provided the opportunity to respond, I would like to offer the following points on behalf of the UNSM Board:

1. **Long Range Planning:** The Board would like to see a better relationship between school boards and municipalities. Municipalities provide the infrastructure and services supporting the physical school. There should be a long term plan for schools similar to how municipalities plan their communities. Involving municipalities in the early planning for a new school, including information municipalities could provide on future development in the community, would go a long way in making the most effective use of tax payers' dollars. It would also minimize arising issues should the school no longer be needed.

Some municipalities feel quite strongly that they should also be involved in the design of a school, to ensure joint uses of the facility are explored. While municipalities understand the purpose of the school is primarily to provide education to the students, the building itself could be designed to meet the needs of the greater community. This could include such features as a library, gymnasium, auditorium, adult learning centre, and meeting space. Given the same taxpayer pays both provincial and municipal taxes, it makes sense to allow maximum efficiency in the spending of those tax dollars. Understanding the long term demographics of the community and the resultant needs should be incorporated into the design, including consideration around the potential use of the building once it is no longer needed for students.

Long range planning should be done at the broader level, in consultation with municipalities. Decisions around new schools, school renovations and school closures should be part of a larger plan so that the complete picture is understood and transparent. A review process that focuses only on one school, without considering alternatives and understanding the full consequences is the wrong approach. Since school board boundaries do not coincide with municipal boundaries, it is important for all municipalities within the school board boundary to understand the bigger picture.

2. **Legislated Review Process:** The review process should be based on transparent and consistent criteria. Cost considerations should include total costs to taxpayers, including direct and indirect costs. The impact of decisions taken should also be evaluated and made public following their implementation to ensure the achievement of what was intended. Information available to the school board and its decisions should be transparent. Releasing annual statistics on the factors considered in a review will help the public and municipalities understand what may be coming.

3. **Schools as Community Assets:** Schools are a public asset paid for by citizens. It appears to many of our members that decisions around school closures are based primarily on financial factors. There seems to be little interest from many of the school boards to find innovative solutions. For example, a number of municipalities have expressed an interest in creating much needed public library space in schools. Public libraries could be utilized in existing schools to fill vacant space left by declining enrolments or could be set up in schools deemed for closure. They could also be considered in the design of new schools. There is no question school boards should determine how best to meet the educational needs first. Once they determine their budget for the facility, municipalities should be consulted for their input. There should be an openness to problem solving. While concerns around student safety are paramount, there are often ways to address this issue.

4. **One Size Does Not Fit All:** Municipalities vary across the province and are in different situations with respect to school closure impacts. We would encourage you to continue discussions with municipalities regarding the circumstances in each case.

The UNSM is convinced that enabling creative and constructive discussion in the community around school facility issues will lead to more positive outcomes.

Again, we thank you for the opportunity to comment on the discussion paper, and we look forward to a greater working relationship between school boards and municipalities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'David Corkum', is written in a cursive style.

Mayor David Corkum
President, UNSM

DC/tv