



Keewatin Impressions

Taking a fresh look at education



by Jim Shirley

RANKIN INLET — When it comes to education, we seem to have more than our share of armchair critics. Of course, when our children's future is involved, education becomes an issue clouded by emotion. Nevertheless...

With the exception of the year we spent on educational leave in Montreal, my son is a product of an NWT education.

One of the most important considerations of my life in the Keewatin is the quality of education that he is receiving. I'm proud to say that, by and large, he has received an excellent education.

Yet I can't help feeling when I look at the educational system in the north that there are some serious gaps. They aren't gaps so much in the mechanics of what is happening in the classroom, but in the direction of the system.

What is the purpose of an education? My first response to that question is that it prepares a person to earn a livelihood.

But let's take a look at the high drop-out rate and alarming suicide rate among our young people.

Maybe we should be looking more at teaching our youngsters how to survive and adjust in a confusing world — to be positive and whole people with a sense of their own value and importance. Survival today is a much more complicated matter than it was 20 or 30 years ago.

I recently had a conversation with a crisis line operator based in Iqaluit. She told me that most problems seemed to be based on the inability of people to communicate their feelings or express themselves.

She went on to say that she thought personal communication skills should be mandatory for most school children. She implied that self-expression was an important key to self-confidence. I

couldn't agree more.

Are we preparing young people for the economic realities they must face as adults? I'm amazed that in a north where business and the economy are so important, many young people don't seem to understand even the basics of commerce.

Understanding of the workings of the business world will determine whether they will be masters or victims of their northern economy. What about Junior Chambers of Commerce as part of the school curriculum?

Keewatin Central MLA John Todd has suggested that government policy should become a more conscious tool for the development of the economy.

I would add that government should become an instrument of the educational system.

The workings of government can and should provide young students with unlimited opportunities to learn first-hand about the realities of northern administration while making a direct contribution. The apprenticeship possibilities are almost unlimited.

Finally, rather than dumping all of these responsibilities on an already overloaded educational system, we should begin to see education as a community responsibility.

Communication skills? Maybe we should be talking to the drug and alcohol centres about expanding their mandate to include programs in personal communications for the schools.

Commerce skills? Perhaps we should call on some of our local business people to donate their skills and time to the creation of exciting business programs for our young people.

It has already been demonstrated that the broader the base of our social commitments to education, the greater the chances of success.