



MILLE LACS BAND OF OJIBWE

Executive Branch of Tribal Government

November 22, 2019

Dear District II Band Members,

On November 8th, a parent came to my office and asked why the students were not able to attend school at the Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy. I reported to the parent that I did not have any information about the school. The parent stated that the school was closed for six weeks, and I again stated to the parent that I did not know that the school was closed. I was not contacted by any school official or notified that Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy closed until the following week, when the school Director attended a Band Assembly meeting and informed me and the other elected officials of the closure.

Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy is not a Mille Lacs Band school. It is a State of Minnesota Public Charter School in the State of Minnesota Department of Education system, and receives state funding like the McGregor Public Schools and every other public school. The Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy is governed by an independent school board. The school is responsible to an "Authorizer" in Minneapolis, called Innovative Quality Schools, which regulates school performance and ensures it is following the laws of the State of Minnesota.

The laws of the Mille Lacs Band do not apply to Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy. The Band's ability to control anything at Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy is exactly the same as our ability to control what happens in the McGregor Public Schools or any other public school: **Zero**. As Chief Executive, neither I, the Band Assembly nor any other Band official has any power, authority or control over Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy as a Minnesota public charter school. The Band has nothing to do with school management decisions, teachers, administration, School Board, or how it spends its budget. It is a State charter school, not a Band school. The following information is intended to provide clear information to parents so you have accurate information, resources and contact information to answer any questions regarding this matter.

1. The first I officially learned from school officials that Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy had closed was at a November 14th public Band Assembly meeting. The Director informed me and the Band Assembly about the closure at that meeting. She discussed the closure and requested a donation from the Band to continue operations. At the November 19th meeting of the Band Assembly, the donation was discussed further but has not been approved as of yet.

2. The Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy representative confirmed at the November 14th Band Assembly meeting that the reason the school closed was due to internal financial management issues. They also agreed that people who are saying that the Mille Lacs Band is

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responsible for the school closure are misinformed, and that neither I, the Band Assembly nor any Band official had anything to do with that decision and have no responsibility for the closure.

3. The Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy representative confirmed that the school was forced to temporarily close due to internal financial management problems. The November 14th Band Assembly meeting was an open public meeting and so all information discussed is public information. At this meeting, we were told that the Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy incorrectly reported student enrollment data to the State of Minnesota, resulting in a loss of approximately \$39,000 in state aid. Other errors resulted in the school being required to pay back \$97,000 in Special Education funding to the State of Minnesota. Also, the school is missing out on reimbursements it is eligible to receive from the State of Minnesota for school breakfast and lunches because it is not submitting the reimbursements. The Director requested a donation from the Mille Lacs Band. At the end of this Band Assembly meeting, elected officials agreed that before considering a donation, we needed additional information. We agreed that the Band Assembly's attorney would contact the school's Authorizer, Innovative Quality Schools in Minneapolis, to seek additional information about the school's status, and that I would contact the Bank to conduct further inquiries about its financial status.

4. At the November 19th Band Assembly meeting, I reported back information I learned from my inquiries. In addition to other financial issues, Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy's checking account is overdrawn by approximately \$50,000, which the Bank stated it may not be able to honor. The Bank stated that due to the severity of the school's financial situation, they also may be unable to provide any additional loans to the school. The Bank stated that it might be able to honor these checks and make another loan to the school if there is an emergency bail-out to the school from another party, like the Band.

5. Also at the November 19th Band Assembly meeting, the Legislative Counsel reported back that the state-approved entity which authorizes Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy to operate as a charter school has other serious concerns. Every State Charter School must have an "Authorizer", which is organization authorized by the State of Minnesota to approve, monitor, evaluate, renew, and, if necessary, close a charter school when contract terms are not met. These contract terms which a school has to meet are not optional, they are required under state law in order for a school to continue operating as a charter school. An authorizer's job is to regulate the school to ensure it is following State law. It makes sure the school is performing well and abiding by these contract terms required by the State. The Band Assembly's Legislative Counsel contacted Innovative Quality Schools, the State-approved authorizer for Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy. Legislative Counsel reported from her conversation with Innovative Quality Schools that there are State Statutes and Minnesota Department of Education requirements the school has not been meeting, such as special education compliance, accurate state reporting, and keeping updated information on the school's website such as Board minutes, financial reports, policies and audits. In a November 20 letter to the Band, Innovative Quality Schools stated that IQS is in the process of developing a notice of deficiency and probationary status, which will likely mean that the school will be required to work with an external consultant to develop an improvement plan.

6. The only schools operated by the Mille Lacs Band are Nay Ah Shing Schools and Pine Grove Leadership Academy. Pine Grove was once a state public charter school like Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy, but is now a federally-funded school in the Bureau of Indian Education system – not the state system – and is operated by the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe.

7. Even though Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy is state-funded like every other public school in Minnesota, the Mille Lacs Band has provided donations to the school for Ojibwe language and culture classes for many years. Significant donations were made over the past twelve months and the school is requesting another significant donation to bail it out now. Even though Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy is a state-funded school, many years ago, the school gained support from the Band Assembly for a Band donation to supplement school funding for Ojibwe language and culture classes. For the past four years, the school has fought hard to make sure the Band government had no authority or decision-making power whatsoever over the school. That is still how it is today. Any donations the Band has made to Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy have no strings attached, and have far exceeded the amount of funding required for Ojibwe culture and language. The Band has no influence over or knowledge of how Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy administrators spend Band donations. Elected officials have serious concerns about whether the Band should continue to provide no-strings-attached donations to the school. Innovative Quality Schools stated in its Nov. 20 letter to the Band, *"It is our experience that a school typically needs at least 60 students to provide enough revenue to sustain the school. MLA would not be able to continue serving students without the ongoing financial support of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe."*

8. At the request of Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy representatives, a few years ago the Band assigned our federal lobbyists to work with the Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy to develop plans to convert it from a state public charter school in the State of Minnesota system to a tribal school in the federal Bureau of Indian Education system, just like Nay-Ah-Shing and Pine Grove, but Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy representatives did not follow through with this process. Research was initiated and discussions began, but school representatives dropped the project. If Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy were to become a Band/BIE school, it would no longer be a state charter school. It would receive federal funding and Band funding and be a satellite school of Nay Ah Shing. Pine Grove Leadership Academy also began as a State public charter school and converted to a Band/BIE school in 2014. Pine Grove is now supported by the Band and federal government. The offer to help Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy become a Band/Bureau of Indian Education school is still possible, although it might take a year or two to complete. Mille Lacs Leadership Academy parents should speak with their School Board members if they are interested in pursuing this, because the request would have to come from the school.

I can only imagine how stressful this must be for parents. I hope this letter clarifies any mis-information. Parents wanting more information should follow up with those entities which the school is accountable to, which are the Minisinaakwaang Leadership Academy's School Board and Innovative Quality Schools, at <https://iqsmn.org>.

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Melanie Benjamin
Chief Executive