

*Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'éducation*  
 SPECIAL ISSUE / NUMÉRO SPÉCIAL  
 Education North of 60 / Éducation au nord du 60e

## “An Exceedingly Complex Institution”<sup>1</sup>: The Making of Sir John Franklin High School, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, 1958–1967

**W.P.J. Millar**

### ABSTRACT

“A difficult school”; “one of the brightest jewels in the...[government’s] crown”; “an exceedingly complex institution.” These descriptions of Sir John Franklin high school by some of its first teachers encapsulate the ambivalent early history of the school. This article traces its development in its first few years, beginning with its inception as an ambitious gleam in the federal government’s eye, and exploring its initial formidable challenges as a vocational and academic high school in the later 1950s and early 1960s for students not only in Yellowknife but coming from throughout the Northwest Territories. Not the least challenge was the provision of an education that would integrate students raised in several different cultures, but there were other difficulties as well. Sir John was not an ordinary high school. In many ways it was a unique institution in the history of Canadian education, based in theory on a southern Canadian model but by necessity incorporating a distinctively northern Canadian reality, and as such, providing a new perspective on the history of Canadian secondary education.

### RÉSUMÉ

« Une école difficile »; « un des plus brillants bijoux de la Couronne »; « une institution excessivement complexe ». Ces descriptions à propos de l'école secondaire John Franklin par quelques-uns de ses premiers enseignants décrivent l'histoire ambivalente des débuts de cette institution. Cet article retrace son développement dans les toutes premières années en commençant par sa conception qui, aux yeux du gouvernement, était ambitieuse. Par la suite, nous explorons les énormes défis de formation professionnelle et académique dans cette école secondaire à la fin des années 1950 et au début des années 1960 pour ses élèves non seulement de Yellowknife mais provenant de tous les Territoires du Nord-Ouest. Un des défis, et non le moindre, fut d'offrir une éducation qui allait intégrer des élèves de différentes cultures. C'était sans compter bien d'autres difficultés. Sir John n'était pas une école secondaire ordinaire. De différentes manières, c'était une institution unique dans l'histoire de l'éducation canadienne qui s'appuyait en théorie sur un modèle inspiré du Sud canadien, mais qui devait par nécessité tenir compte de la réalité distinctive du Nord canadien. Cette école devait offrir une nouvelle perspective dans l'histoire de l'éducation secondaire au Canada.

In the mid-twentieth century, new political initiatives began to remake educational provision in the Northwest Territories (NWT).<sup>2</sup> Among them was the decision to establish, for the first time, a public, non-denominational, comprehensive (or composite) secondary school, to be located in Yellowknife, to offer a full range of high-quality academic and vocational programs, and to serve the population of the entire territory, Indigenous and settlers alike. This article, focusing on the origins and early history of that school, poses the following questions: why was it needed, how was it provided, what initial problems did its founders encounter, and what challenges did teachers and administrators confront in introducing southern models and expectations for a modern secondary school to north of 60?

Situated on a bay of the North Arm of Great Slave Lake, Yellowknife began as a gold-rush town in the mid-1930s, and by 1939 it was an established municipality with three gold mines in production within the town limits, and two more nearby. But growth was erratic; during World War II, with decreasing demand for gold, the mines closed and population declined. Even with the end of the war and then with new mines opening, the town grew slowly. As late as 1961, it still had only some 3,200 inhabitants: it was, at best, hardly more than an overgrown village. It remained, as well, one of the very few towns in a sparsely inhabited and vast geographical expanse where the necessities of life were expensive and living conditions could be hard. Though communities were connected by air and water, travel between them or to the south was expensive and weather conditions unreliable; spring break-up and fall freeze-up of waterways put a stop to much travel for many weeks of the year. As for travel by road, an overland route from the south to Yellowknife was not



*Aerial view of Sir John Franklin Territorial High School/Akaiitcho Hall, Yellowknife, 1958.  
NWT Archives/Henry Busse fonds/N-1979-052: 4107.*

completed until 1961, and until 2012 it necessitated a ferry trip across the wide Mackenzie river, which like other waterways north of 60 was impassable for several weeks each fall and spring.<sup>3</sup>

By the mid-1950s, however, and despite its modest size, the town already had a well-established school system consisting of a central public school for both elementary and secondary education, with fifteen classrooms, thirteen classroom teachers including the principal and vice-principal, plus two teachers for industrial arts and home economics, and some 250 pupils in grades 1 to 12.<sup>4</sup> The vast majority were enrolled in the elementary grades: in 1956, for example, there were only 34 high school students.<sup>5</sup> The curriculum followed the Alberta program of studies, and the teachers' qualifications met Alberta's certification standards.<sup>6</sup> Along with its public school, however, Yellowknife also had a Roman Catholic separate school, established after intense lobbying by Catholic clergy and laity.<sup>7</sup> By 1958, it had six classrooms, six teachers of whom two, including the principal, were women religious, and 131 pupils.<sup>8</sup>

Both schools operated within a (mostly) conventional Canadian model of educational governance. In the case of the public school, the town of Yellowknife constituted its own school district, governed by a school board that consisted of locally elected trustees, who appointed the principal and teachers and oversaw the work of the school just as boards did in provincial school systems. The school was also financed by conventional means: a combination of residential, commercial, and industrial property taxation, and grants from the federal and territorial governments.

This, however, was a central authority with a difference—it was the federal government, and not a provincial or territorial government, that was in charge of educational administration.<sup>9</sup> And, by way of necessary background, that requires some explanation. First, Yellowknife was not the capital of NWT until 1967, and education in the territories, including the town, did not become the sole responsibility of the territorial government until 1969. Before those dates, the territorial headquarters for education was in Fort Smith, far off on the other side of Great Slave Lake and more than 250 kilometres inland, at the border of Alberta and NWT. Here, the District Superintendent of Education resided at the field office for education. The field office was responsible for the general oversight of schools across the whole of the territories, including what is now Nunavut—an enormous expanse encompassing a huge range of geographical conditions, communities, and peoples. But the function of the Fort Smith office was mainly administrative and supervisory. Though there was a territorial council with authority over education legislation, it had no civil service and could not organize and administer a school system itself; it therefore agreed with the federal government to have the latter provide schooling for all children, not only the Dene and Inuit who were Ottawa's particular responsibility. In turn, the territorial council paid the federal government for the schooling of non-Indigenous children. Subject to the provisions of the school ordinance and limited provision for funding made by the council, real authority for administration and funding thus rested with the federal government. All major educational policy decisions, including “general overall policy and planning...supplying resources service in various fields...curriculum development, finance, and...regulation,”<sup>10</sup> were made in Ottawa.

Though elementary education in Yellowknife was well provided for, secondary education was more problematic. In the town's public school, the high school department had only three teachers qualified to teach Alberta's secondary curriculum, and they included the principal and vice-principal, who of course had administrative and supervisory tasks as well. The best that could be done in these circumstances was to offer a minimal core of academic subjects to that handful of pupils who might be preparing for entry to postsecondary education or some form of white-collar work. And even that limited program of studies required teachers to provide instruction in courses where they had little or no expertise. There was, however, no ready solution to that situation. The town's tax base was too limited to allow the school board to hire a sufficient number of teachers or to provide the kind of facilities one might expect in larger, richer communities elsewhere in Canada—a wide range of subject options, courses that took adequate account of individual differences, and technical or commercial programs. Always and everywhere, because of higher teachers' salaries and other operating and capital costs, secondary education was far more expensive than elementary education, and given the limited clientele for an academic high school education, spending priorities in Yellowknife necessarily fell on the elementary grades that served the vast majority of pupils.

There was, in any case, another inhibiting factor. Yellowknife's Catholic school also offered some high school work—to only a handful of students, it is true, but nevertheless the separate school board wanted to ensure that Catholic children had the option of a denominational secondary education, and it claimed its share of public support for that.<sup>11</sup> So the potential high school student body was split between two schools, and so were resources, including the tax base and the government grant. The public school was therefore even smaller and had fewer resources than if it had been the only school to attempt high school classes.

Despite all the drawbacks, nonetheless, Alberta's senior inspector of schools could, in 1954, compare the public board's high school department "quite favourably with high schools of comparable size in the province of Alberta."<sup>12</sup> But that was only to say that provision for secondary education in many villages and small towns in Alberta (and indeed across the entire country) exhibited similar characteristics: in nearly all small school districts, budgets were sharply constrained by a limited tax base, with the result that secondary education was, by the standards of larger urban communities at least, extremely limited in the range of its programs of study.<sup>13</sup> By the postwar decade, on the other hand, there had emerged a conventional response to that dilemma: the consolidation of rural and small-town school districts that would, among other advantages, provide a tax base able to support a good regional high school. That, however, was hardly an option for Yellowknife: there *was* no other public school district in NWT.<sup>14</sup> Thus, and despite growing expectations among Yellowknife parents, it was beyond the capacity of its school board to extend the opportunities available for secondary education increasingly taken for granted elsewhere in Canada. Any new initiatives and the fiscal resources to sustain them would have to come from somewhere else.

That “somewhere else” turned out to be the federal government. Though, as I have already suggested, a territorial administrative and policy structure for education was established by mid-century, program development was not: as Louis St. Laurent once remarked, it seemed as though the federal government “administered these vast territories of the north in an almost continuing state of absence of mind.”<sup>15</sup> That neglect included education. Outside of a handful of centres in NWT, schooling was very limited in scope, and the federal government had gladly relinquished most of its responsibility to the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches, which operated day and residential schools. But after the Second World War, this state of affairs began to change. New pressures, especially to take control of the resource-rich north and to assert arctic sovereignty, brought renewed attention to the condition of its inhabitants and their apparent need for schooling to acquire work skills for the modern era. Thus the government began a school-building program in 1947.<sup>16</sup> Still, by the mid-’50s, provision of even elementary education was limited across NWT, and secondary education was scarcely known.<sup>17</sup>

A renewed and more ambitious effort to enable territorial education to catch up with its provincial counterparts began in 1955.<sup>18</sup> Early that year, Jean Lesage, then Minister of Northern Affairs, announced a comprehensive federal effort to pour resources into education in NWT. One key part of that plan was to locate a secondary school in Yellowknife. Modelled after the large comprehensive (or composite) schools in Canada’s southern cities and larger towns, it was to offer a full range of academic and vocational programs and a much expanded staff of teachers. Built on what was then the edge of “New Town,” a rapidly growing centre for government offices, commercial hub, and new homes, it was a considerable distance from the original settlement of Old Town (and thus removed from what some thought to be a less reputable neighbourhood). Sir John Franklin High School, an impressive addition to the modest Yellowknife skyline, opened in September 1958.<sup>19</sup>

The new school represented a substantial departure from Canadian norms in several ways. Most remarkable was the method by which it was funded. In the provinces, capital and operating expenditures were conventionally financed by joint contributions from provincial governments and local school boards, or by a school board alone. Sir John was totally built and equipped by the federal government at its own expense. It also bore some of the operating costs, splitting these with the territorial government (itself heavily subsidized by Ottawa).<sup>20</sup> In conception, execution, and sustenance, in other words, this new secondary school was entirely the work of the federal government.

Not surprisingly, the good citizens of Yellowknife believed they had hit the jackpot and won the lottery all at once. For a brand-new, full-service institution, they would pay nothing at all—no increase in property taxes, no other form of municipal funding. “AN EDUCATIONAL BONANZA,” rhapsodized the local newspaper: it was “almost incredible...Education from Grade 10 to Grade 12 for Yellowknife children will be at no expense to the Yellowknife taxpayer whatever.”<sup>21</sup>

While there was no taxation, however, there was, less oft remarked, no representation either. The school was not under the jurisdiction of the elected board of trustees

and not part of the Yellowknife public school district. It was to be run from Ottawa and Fort Smith, and that included the curriculum, the appointment and supervision of the principal and teachers, and of course general educational policies. Local residents thus had no ability to affect governance nor any way to formally express their opinions about operational issues.

There was, in fact, good reason for this arrangement, in the minds of federal authorities at least. Despite its location in Yellowknife, the school was not designed primarily to serve town residents. Quite the opposite: it was to serve *all* of NWT, and all students from outside of town who might be seeking (and qualified to seek) an academic or vocational secondary program. Rather than constituting a town school meant to serve town pupils and purposes alone, it simply made its physical home in Yellowknife; it cast a much wider net for students and had more expansive ambitions.

But that, in turn, meant that students coming from outside Yellowknife had to be gathered together and provided with accommodation. Even setting aside the precedent of the church-run residential schools, the idea of providing a school-linked hostel was not a new one. Before consolidation and the school bus became universal, several provinces had encouraged urban school boards to establish hostels for rural students who wanted to pursue a secondary education unavailable at home. But in nearly all cases these were small, ad hoc, and fee-charging. What was unique to NWT was the sheer scale of planning and expenditure that entailed.<sup>22</sup> And that, again, was borne entirely by the federal government. Costs included air transportation for students coming from outside the town in a massive airlift twice a year, fall and spring, over a huge extent of territory.<sup>23</sup> (This in itself was unique: unlike the rest of the country by 1958, the near-ubiquitous yellow school bus was unknown—there was no territorial road system.) And for these students, living quarters had to be provided. So Akaitcho Hall, a 100-bed hostel (enlarged to 200 in succeeding years), was built beside the school, and staffed with a full complement of personnel, thirteen in total at the opening, from the hostel supervisor, and boys' and girls' dormitory supervisors, down to cooks, caretakers, and janitors.<sup>24</sup> The building itself was fully equipped, including laundry facilities, office space, study rooms, kitchen, and a large dining hall/recreation room that could be opened up to provide an entertainment area.<sup>25</sup> Ottawa, moreover, provided board and accommodation for all students from outside Yellowknife, as well as winter clothing and a weekly spending allowance for many of them.<sup>26</sup>

Another principle of the federal plan was equally important: integration. First, education in NWT would henceforth be ethnically integrated.<sup>27</sup> Thus Sir John, like the other territorial schools, was to admit all peoples: in the terminology of the times, whites, mixed race, Indians, Eskimos.<sup>28</sup> In practice, in small and remote communities with a homogeneous population, this policy may not have made much difference. In Yellowknife, it represented a significant change for students used to the public school, which had almost no non-white children. Moreover, uniquely in the case of Sir John, there would be religious integration in the hostel as well as in the school, with both Roman Catholics and non-Catholics learning *and living* together—a practice unknown in other hostels in NWT. Both religious and ethnic integration represented a sharp break with former practices in the town.

The vision was ambitious. Implementation was something else. There were difficulties of various sorts throughout the first decade of the school, and beyond. Some of these problems were temporary, but soluble, albeit with many false starts and initial confusion—perhaps to be expected when establishing a complex and innovative plan, but made worse by inadequate planning.

For example, there was what can only be charitably described as a fair amount of administrative chaos. The Fort Smith administration had formulated the basic plan for the school and residence complex, and then persuaded Ottawa to adopt it. But apparently not much, if any, thought had been given to getting the school up and running. For example: who would do the initial organization, and how was that to be done? Two months before school was to open in September, the newly appointed vice-principal reported to the Chief of the Education Division in Ottawa for duty. According to his account, he was told: “you know this is a brand new school... What I want you to do for the next two months is to organize this school... just assume that nothing has been done, because I don't believe anything has...”<sup>29</sup> So the new vice-principal—who had taught high school, but confessed he didn't know anything about administration—sat down *in Ottawa* and started devising an organization from scratch. Back in Yellowknife, the newly appointed industrial arts teacher, faced with, as he said, “the school about to start and nothing had been done about time-tabling or anything like that,” began to do the same thing.<sup>30</sup> The two men worked in total ignorance of each other's efforts until they met in August in Yellowknife; fortuitously, their separate planning meshed. The new principal, however, was not involved in this essential preliminary work; he did not even arrive until after the school opened; a month later he became ill, and then he tried to run the school from his sickbed.<sup>31</sup>

The difficulties of setting up a brand-new sort of enterprise extended to the operation of the hostel, which was considered to be an integral part of the school. Various practical problems piled up. There was, for example, a large contingent of staff to be appointed and settled in to their duties; this was not begun until mid-August, due to a “dearth of information from head-office.”<sup>32</sup> A few weeks into the school year, the chief cook had to be reprimanded because of complaints that he served “sausages, and similar food, by hand” and allowed very unsanitary kitchen conditions. Indeed, one of the sub-cooks left because, as she claimed, “she could not work in a kitchen as unsanitary or where food was so uncleanly handled,” which subsequent investigation found to be a “well founded” allegation.<sup>33</sup> The physical plant was still being tidied up in the first years, resulting in such unforeseen puzzles as what to do with the diaphanous, and expensive, curtains that the vice-principal, a Scot, mistakenly ordered instead of heavy drapes because he misconstrued the more ambiguous meaning of “curtains” in the Canadian lexicon.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, there were the unmarked room keys left all in a jumble in a drawer (painstakingly figured out by a teacher over a summer, but a solution made redundant when the locks were immediately changed).<sup>35</sup>

More problematic for academic work and residential life, in the first few years especially, it proved difficult to organize and co-ordinate transportation so that it fit into the school year efficiently. Teachers and staff had to cope with students arriving



in groups at different times through the fall and similarly leaving at different times in the spring. Such confusion was cleared up only gradually.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, there was at least initial misunderstanding over who was in charge of the residence—the principal or the hostel's chief supervisor? It was discovered only at the official opening of the school that "apparently there were no terms of reference provided" for either. Ottawa and Fort Smith personnel had to sit down at that late date to outline the responsibilities and powers of these key staff members.<sup>37</sup> But as one teacher later commented, although "as far as the education people were concerned" the principal's authority included "supervision of the residence, because the idea was that the residence was a part of the school and the activities should be integrated," the "administration people [federal government] ran the residence" and the hostel supervisor's terms of reference "indicated a sort of independence from the school."<sup>38</sup> Another confirmed that "one of the things that I felt myself" was "some kind of confrontation between [the school and]...Akaitcho Hall, where they wanted to build esprit-de-corps within themselves...that tended in a way to separate them from the school...they were working for the smaller unit and that made it difficult at times."<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps more seriously, there was a fundamental lack of clarity about another chain of command. Far, far away, in Ottawa, the federal government issued policies and instructions. Far away, in Fort Smith, the district office had to interpret these and fit them to conditions in Yellowknife. Meanwhile, at ground zero, the principal of Sir John had to deal with daily operations. But without any clear guidelines, there was no agreement over matters great and small about exactly who was in charge. Moreover, given the distances and communications problems involved, misunderstandings could occur; at the very least, problems often had to be thrashed out over weeks and months. As N.J. Macpherson comments, "to imagine that an operation as complex as a school in which Ottawa, Fort Smith and Yellowknife officials all had a special interest would run smoothly at all times, was expecting too much."<sup>40</sup> He goes on to detail the controversy and conflict that could result. For example, three years after Sir John opened there was a major confrontation between the principal and senior staff of the school, on the one hand, and the administrators in Fort Smith and Ottawa, on the other. The issues involved such relatively minor matters as whether the principal had the authority to establish a summer camp, or to use a donated second-hand vehicle for driving instruction (in both cases the administrators insisted that he did not), and then escalated into lengthy memos back and forth, with a long list of demands from the school staff and dark mutterings about the possibility of resignations. Eventually these differences seem to have been resolved, although the principal, for one, found a position elsewhere for the following school year.<sup>41</sup>

These kinds of problems would gradually yield as issues were resolved and management routines established. But a second set of problems raised more fundamental challenges. There was, first, the curriculum. The academic program didn't pose serious difficulties in organization because it had to meet matriculation standards and these were clearly spelled out in the Alberta program of studies. But vocational education was much more problematic because training for particular occupations was supposed to be geared to what was actually needed—that is, pertinent to the



conditions and experience of the North. And it was a continuing struggle to decide just what would constitute a suitable vocational program. For example, what kind of skills were needed? What kind of training actually met the divergent needs and opportunities of northern communities across the NWT?

The program as first established consisted of a fairly conventional lineup: a commercial course; home economics, with a food services subdivision; carpentry; and auto mechanics. The two options that gave special consideration to northern conditions were building construction, and heavy equipment operation and maintenance.<sup>42</sup> But how relevant were these courses for students who then sought jobs back home, in the small and scattered communities of the North? Heavy equipment and construction: yes, there were some mining jobs, and buildings to put up. But how many jobs of this sort actually existed, and how accessible were they for students who wanted to go back to their own communities?<sup>43</sup> Or food services: mainly taken by Indigenous girls, it prepared them for jobs as waitresses and cooks, along with “homemaking” skills. When they returned home, where would they find work? Where would they find the fancy new electric stoves they learned on at school?<sup>44</sup> The vocational program, in other words, equipped students for some mining and building work, but it was mostly built on a southern template geared to modern urban life.

Aside from that, there was a second, fundamental problem, and that was, how to actually implement the vocational program. The original aim was to establish a school that would offer a full slate of academic and vocational studies *at the secondary level*. And the first announcements stated that only children who had completed elementary school work and had passed the required examinations to enter high school could be admitted.<sup>45</sup> But there was a very small pool of students able to attain that level. Only town students and a handful of non-residents were in any way academically ready. Outside a very few communities, there were no elementary feeder schools preparing students adequately. The result was that for secondary-level vocational as well as academic work, literacy and numeracy skills were required that most students from outside Yellowknife didn't have.<sup>46</sup>

Worse still: the vaunted policy of integration did not apply to the language of instruction. As the commissioner of NWT insisted, “Teaching had to be in English, not by design but by necessity”<sup>47</sup>—there were many native languages and no qualified teachers able to teach in all those languages; or at least, this, coupled with notions about appropriate pedagogy, was the standard justification for the policy. Though English was the language of instruction, however, many students had inadequate or even non-existent English-language skills. Some students stepped off the plane knowing only their own Indigenous language.<sup>48</sup>

Thus the high school vocational program couldn't operate effectively because many of the students who went into it were not able to function at a secondary-education level. The solution was to establish a pre-vocational program—to bring them up to an adequate academic level for high school work. That was ambitious enough, although even then, for those destined for the vocational program, the requirements were not high, given that some students were starting from a grade 5, grade 4, or even grade 1 academic level—or even no formal schooling at all.<sup>49</sup> As one principal

noted, "We have the general objective of raising their ability to certain standards... For most of them we intend to do no more in English than to give them the facility one might expect from, say, a good grade eight student."<sup>50</sup> The pre-vocational program was not, however, what the term usually meant in southern Canada—that is, a program for those pupils intellectually, physically, or emotionally unable to cope with the standard elementary curriculum. Those enrolled in the program at Sir John were not "slow learners" but rather, young people who had only a few months or years of schooling and who lacked fluency in English or mathematics, etc. Thus the program was more akin to English as a second language, designed to prepare students for more advanced work.

By 1959, then, the school had settled on three core programs: academic, vocational, and pre-vocational. Altogether, total enrolment stood at 143—88 whites and 53 Indigenous.<sup>51</sup> But enrolment by program was sharply patterned. In the academic program, students were almost all white, and almost all were residents of Yellowknife; in the other two programs, most were Indigenous, with a large number enrolled in the pre-vocational stream. This pattern continued well into the '60s: in 1964, there were 138 whites, of whom 34 were in vocational and pre-vocational classes; 57 out of 65 Indians were in the vocational/pre-vocational stream, and 32 out of 34 Eskimos.<sup>52</sup>

After the school day was over, Yellowknife students went home to familiar surroundings, and were already socialized to patterns of behaviour and expectations demanded by parents, school, and community. Like all adolescents they might, on occasion, violate familiar rules and norms. But they didn't have to struggle with an unfamiliar language or experience the stresses of cultural dissonance. None of that was the case for Indigenous students, who came from far-flung communities, initially from all over the western half of the territories and then from the Eastern Arctic as well. These students, moreover, did not constitute a homogenous group. Among them were Métis, First Nations, and Inuit, who themselves were drawn from a number of distinct localities and cultures. The differences between Dene from the western Mackenzie district, or Inuit from Baker Lake, west of Hudson's Bay, or Inuit from Baffin Island, could be considerable: they spoke different languages and dialects, they dressed differently at home, they were used to eating different foods. Living in Akaitcho Hall, they had to cope with homesickness for parents and their own communities and cultures, getting used to each other's and to white ways, adjusting to life in what was for them a big town. They had to learn how to abide by residence rules, eat southern-style food, and follow a southern-style residence regime.<sup>53</sup> Even so, to the extent that we can depend on the reports of administrators, teachers, and other staff, it seems that many of these young people apparently settled in, lived and played together, and generally got along.<sup>54</sup>

There were continuing problems, nonetheless. One arose from policies adopted at Akaitcho Hall that were designed to regulate and socialize young teenagers. There were strict rules about when to get up and when to go to bed, meal times and homework times, and a lot of rules aimed at keeping students "out of trouble" in town.<sup>55</sup> But the ages of the non-resident students until well into the 1960s ranged from

younger to older adolescents and even grown men and women in their twenties.<sup>56</sup> And some of these older students saw no reason why they couldn't make their own rules—couldn't, for example, go into town and have a drink at the local bar, socialize with the local residents, and stay out late, or even overnight. An early report to Fort Smith raised the alarm:

One particular problem has arisen which has been of great concern to both the school and hostel, and has taken up a good deal of the time of everyone concerned...A few of the pupils sent to us were known social problems. In general, they are of the type who are not capable of such routines and regulations as are essential to an institution such as ours...Moreover, they have become committed to patterns of social behaviour which cannot be countenanced... Despite our efforts at counselling and correction, we have been powerless to do anything to prevent some of these few from outright defiance of regulations. As a result, we have had several of these people leaving the hostel, and staying out overnight...The proximity of Old Town, the ever-ready supply of unscrupulous and misguided characters, presents to these people a temptation and an influence which we can do little to counteract.<sup>57</sup>

The hostel superintendent also noted these dangerous possibilities for younger students and especially for those from Indigenous cultures:

...certainly the adjustment of inexperienced Indians, Eskimo, and Metis... is demanding of guidance...These young people bring their habits and behaviourisms with them as demonstrated by their tendency to wander the streets aimlessly rather than remain at the hostel...As is the situation in smaller northern settlements, they regard restaurants and cafes as community social gathering places, rather than the hang-out of undesirable and unprincipled characters. Thus without supervision and counsel they are easy victims to misguided and undesirable men...Drunkenness has not been confined to the boys: on three occasions, girls have returned from town inebriated...Eight girls have had town leave cancelled indefinitely...<sup>58</sup>

Not surprisingly, there were a fair number of discipline problems, especially in the early years, and a continuing tension between school expectations, young people's behaviour, and the norms of northern communities.<sup>59</sup>

Reporting to headquarters in 1964, the principal summed up some of the issues the school was encountering with students from outside Yellowknife and equally some of the misconceptions that led to such results: "Quite a few students...have left Sir John Franklin School and Akaitcho Hall this term. They have left because their parents wanted them to return home, because they have been unable or unwilling to adjust to conditions in the residence or in the school...because they have refused to obey the rules of the institution...[and because] a considerable number of students claim they were not informed as to the purpose or programme of this school."<sup>60</sup>

The other major cultural problem concerned local attitudes towards the school and the non-resident students. And here, two issues can be teased out. First of all, there were at least some mixed classes—instances where academic students were picking up a vocational option, or where Indigenous young people were enrolled in high school academic subjects. But Yellowknife students were not accustomed to schooling alongside Indigenous students, who were rarely found in the town's public school.<sup>61</sup> And there were a few white students attending Sir John who made their feelings known. For example, one teacher recounted an incident in which town students he labelled "rednecks" told him "in no uncertain terms...they didn't want to be in the same class and used rather vulgar expressions for the native students."<sup>62</sup> Another recalled that there was "that Akaitcho group and the town group...it was a new experience for both...I remember town kids coming in and forgetting where they were going to sit and they'd sit down beside an Inuit or a Dene and they'd suddenly realize what they'd done and they'd move away."<sup>63</sup> Most probably there were other undocumented incidents of such casual snubs and the like.<sup>64</sup>

There were also hostile attitudes among some townfolk to the very nature of the school. For example, one principal admitted that "there has been a small but vocal group in town who have traditionally been very critical of their schools, and especially this one, since it is a Government school and since it has Indian and Eskimo students. In fact," he continued, "a very prominent member of the community, and one who has an important voice in education, told me, this year, that the problems of our school could be summed up in a few words, 'too many Eskimos'."<sup>65</sup> The two issues of a federal school, and an integrated student body, fed into each other. Yellowknife taxpayers may have been happy at not having to pay for the school, but they were unhappy about having no say in its operation because they had no representation on a governing body. The same principal argued that at least "some adequate arrangement must be made with the town of Yellowknife whereby they are given some authority and are officially consulted and advised on what is being done for the education of their children."<sup>66</sup> In the initial years at least, no one, on the other hand, seems to have suggested consulting the views of Indigenous students or their communities.

Perhaps we shouldn't make too much of the initial administrative muddles in setting up Sir John. Given the expansion of provincial school systems in the post-war decades, by the late 1950s most southern school boards had acquired vast experience in the necessary procedures that attended opening a new elementary or secondary school. Ottawa simply did not have the same level of expertise: false starts and a certain amount of adhoc-ery were probably inevitable. And these sorts of problems didn't extend much beyond the first two or three years—many of them, indeed, beyond the first academic year. However "complex" the initial challenges, for both school and hostel, administrative and teaching routines tended to sort themselves out fairly early on.

The big winners in the creation of Sir John were, without much qualification, the people of Yellowknife. They acquired a modern, comprehensive secondary school offering a full academic and vocational curriculum, one that they could never have

afforded on their own. It was one, moreover, that many small urban and rural communities in southern Canada could only envy, since even many of the new regional high schools created during the first decade or so of school district consolidation could not match the facilities available at Sir John.

For the non-resident students, however, the results were much more mixed. True, educational opportunities were now available that had never existed before. This benefited at least some individuals and Indigenous communities, and not only through the acquisition of literacy and vocational skills but through the socialization and academic know-how that would have long-term payoff in critical leadership skills.<sup>67</sup> There were, on the other hand, continuing difficulties. Probably most important, nearly all Indigenous students were learning—or trying to learn—in a second language, which put them at a distinct academic disadvantage and necessitated expedients that the school's founders did not anticipate, above all the creation of the “pre-vocational program.” At the same time they were faced with the challenge of adapting to an alien culture and an unfamiliar urban environment. In the early years especially, administrators, teachers, and students themselves faced a steep learning curve.

It was probably a mark of progress, in the decade after mid-century, to introduce policies designed to bring territorial education into the modern world. Yet the policies themselves, along with those who designed them, reveal levels of optimism bordering on naivety that all one had to do to address educational issues in NWT was to pour money into transplanting southern-style educational institutions and practices without much concern about the profoundly different circumstances surrounding language, culture, curriculum, and pedagogy. It would take a long time to learn to think through and organize schools that would meet the wants and needs of most communities North of 60.

## Notes

- 1 The first principal's phrase; an experienced teacher, he thought it was “more so than any school of which I know”: Northwest Territories Archives [NWT A], Canada, Northern Administration Branch Records, Education, 600 series, G1979 [hereafter NWT A, G1979], 003, Box 228-12, General—Sir John Franklin School, 1959–60, J.M. Black to Chief Supt. W.G. Booth, 6 April 1959, p. 8. The end date for “the making” of the school marks the transfer of the seat of government from Ottawa to Yellowknife. In this article I will refer to the school simply as “Sir John.”
- 2 Norman John Macpherson, *Dreams & Visions: Education in the Northwest Territories from Early Days to 1984* (Yellowknife: Dept. of Education, Government of the Northwest Territories, 1991), 63, 115-16. This voluminous compilation of documents, recollections, and Macpherson's own writing, though not a straightforward history, contains much valuable material. Researchers should be aware however that materials collected for this volume were selectively edited, and they should also consult NWT A, G1988, 004, which contains the original unedited documentation. Macpherson was principal of Sir John from 1962 to 1964; then, successively, regional superintendent, superintendent of Yellowknife, and director of education for NWT. For a general history that covers education in this period, see Morris Zaslow, *The Northward Expansion of Canada, 1914–1967* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988), esp. chaps.

- 7 to 12; on Yellowknife, see esp. 182-83, 186-87, 196-97, 295, 318. Other useful sources are *Education North of 60* (A Report Prepared by Members of the Canadian Association of School Superintendents and Inspectors in the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources) (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1965); Gordon Robertson, *Memoirs of a Very Civil Servant: Mackenzie King to Pierre Trudeau* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), esp. chap. 6; Robert E. Johns, "History of Administration of Schools, N.W.T.," *Musk-Ox* 18 (1976): 42-57. A valuable source that is much broader than its title indicates is Robert J. Carney, "Relations in Education between the Federal and Territorial Governments and the Roman Catholic Church in the Mackenzie District, Northwest Territories, 1867–1961" (PhD diss., University of Alberta, 1971).
- 3 *Annual Report [AR]*, Commissioner, NWT, 1960–61, 23-24. On the sense of isolation and difficulties caused by these conditions, see for example the editorials in *News of the North [NN]*, 21 April 1960, 6, and 13 Oct. 1960, 6; *Education North of 60*, chap. 7.
  - 4 There are brief descriptions of the school (and of territorial education generally) in the successive *Annual Reports* of the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources [DNANR]; see for example the *AR* for 1955–56, Appendix G, *AR* of the Commissioner, NWT, 104. For the number of teachers and students, see *NN*, 7 Sept. 1956, 1, and NWTa, N92-200, 5/2, superintendent's reports, 19 Dec. 1956. The industrial arts and home economics programs were established in the mid-50s: see NWTa, N92-200, 1/2, minutes, Board of Trustees, Yellowknife School District, 8 March 1955.
  - 5 Out of a total enrolment of 268; *NN*, 7 Sept. 1956, 1. In 1957, the year before Sir John opened, there were only 29 students in those grades in the public school out of a total of 251; NWTa, G1979, 003, Box 211-5, Classification of Pupils, Yellowknife public school, 31 March 1957.
  - 6 *Education North of 60*, 41.
  - 7 Carney, "Relations in Education," 515-48.
  - 8 NWTa, G1979, 003, Box 230-2, Yellowknife Public School District No. 1 Reports, telex message from Sr. Marguerite to supt. of schools, Roman Catholic Separate School, 11 Sept. 1958; there was 1 pupil in grade 11 (the other high school students had transferred to Sir John: Carney, "Relations in Education," 562). The year before, there had been 3 pupils in grade 10 and 1 in grade 11: NWTa, G1979, 003, Box 211-5, Classification of Pupils, Yellowknife Roman Catholic Separate School District No. 2, 31 March 1957.
  - 9 While the territorial council (or territorial government, as contemporary documents also referred to it) passed the basic school ordinance, beyond that it exercised no significant influence in educational policy and administration except at the behest of the Commissioner, who was both head of the council and deputy minister of DNANR. For this paragraph see Zaslow, *Northward Expansion*, 22, 24-25, 188-92, 317, 363-66, and Morris Zaslow, *The Northwest Territories, 1903–1980* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, Historical Booklet No. 38, 1984), 18-19; *Education North of 60*, 6-9.
  - 10 *Education North of 60*, 9.
  - 11 In March 1957, there were 4 pupils in grades 10 and 11, with a total school enrolment of 131: NWTa, G1979, 003, Box 211-5, classification of pupils, Yellowknife Roman Catholic separate school district no. 2, 31 March 1957.
  - 12 NWTa, N92-200, 1/2, Minutes, Yellowknife Public School District, 12 Jan. 1954.
  - 13 For a general survey of these problems see R.D. Gidney and W.P.J. Millar, *How Schools Worked: Public Education in English Canada, 1900–1940* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012), chaps. 6 and 10, esp. 249-51; Lawrence W. Downey, *The Small High School in Alberta* (Edmonton: Alberta School Trustees Association, 1965).
  - 14 See *AR*, DNANR, 1957–58, Appendix H, *AR*, Commissioner, NWT, 114.

- 15 Robertson, *Memoirs*, 114.
- 16 See Zaslow, *Northward Expansion*, chaps. 11 and 12, for a general overview.
- 17 See the brief sections on education, *ARs*, DNANR, in the late 1940s and early 1950s.
- 18 See especially *ibid.*, 1954–55, “Education and Training for the Future,” 18-19, and 1957–58, Appendix H, Report, Commissioner, 115. See also Robertson, *Memoirs*, 140-41.
- 19 This name was chosen in a contest sponsored by the local newspaper, whose editor disliked the first somewhat cumbersome title, rendered variously as Yellowknife Federal and Territorial Composite High School and Vocational School or Yellowknife Federal Vocational Training and High School: see *NN*, 17 July 1956, 10; 2 Oct. 1958, 1; 4 Dec. 1958, 1. For the excitement of the townspeople on the opening of the school, see *NN*'s many columns, editorials, photographs, and congratulatory messages from local businesses throughout September and October issues, 1958.
- 20 *AR*, DNANR, 1954–55, Appendix G, *AR*, Commissioner, NWT, 104; Macpherson, *Dreams & Visions*, 116.
- 21 *NN*, 13 May 1955, 4, editorial. See also p. 1.
- 22 Unique, that is, to Canada, but again, not without precedent. The chief superintendent and the hostel supervisor modelled their plan for a town school with a residence, to accommodate students drawn from outside the town, on Mount Edgecumbe High School, in Sitka, Alaska, a residential state school that began as a vocational school serving mainly Alaskan Natives and some town settlers; NWT, G1979, 003, Box 213-5, Summary, staff meetings 1958, Minutes of staff meeting, 4 March 1958; see also Macpherson, *Dreams & Visions*, 108, 167. For information about the school, see <http://www.ankn.uaf.edu>
- 23 See Zaslow, *Northward Expansion*, 296; *Education North of 60*, 3, 101-3. For a vivid account at a later date, see Helen Burgess, “Operation Back to School,” *North* 15, 5 (Sept.–Oct. 1968): 2-5.
- 24 Macpherson, *Dreams & Visions*, 165.
- 25 NWT, G1979, 003, Box 227-1, Yellowknife Vocational School, Progress Report, A.B. Boxer to J.M. Black, 9 Dec. 1958.
- 26 In December of that first year, the hostel superintendent was pleading for these items: “Parkas, Heavy trousers, Caps, Mittens, are items which many students lack;” allowances, because “many have no funds whatever” and some “petty thievery” was occurring in the dorms, which lacked secure lockers; NWT, G1979, 003, Box 227-1, Yellowknife Vocational School, A.J. Boxer to J.M. Black, 9 Dec. 1958.
- 27 There is now a large literature on the introduction of the policy of integration; for discussion and bibliographical references, see for example Helen Raptis, “Implementing Integrated Education Policy for On-Reserve Aboriginal Children in British Columbia, 1951–1981,” *Historical Studies in Education* 20 (Spring 2008): 118-46, and “Exploring the Factors Prompting British Columbia’s First Integration Initiative: The Case of Port Essington Indian Day School,” *History of Education Quarterly* 51, 4 (2011): 519-43.
- 28 I will use this terminology at times because, in order to determine which level of government would pay for schooling, each student’s ethnicity was noted on the school registers as “W” (white, including Métis), “I” (treaty Indian) or “E” (Eskimo), and that record is what allows us to determine the numbers of “I” and “E” attending school. Ottawa made this policy explicit: “For purposes of administration, only three classifications are necessary, i.e. white pupils, Indian pupils, Eskimo pupils...include ‘Others’ [i.e. Métis] with the white pupils”; NWT, G1979, 003, Box 211-5, J.V. Jacobson, Ottawa, to W.G. Booth, Chief Superintendent, Fort Smith, 28 Nov. 1958.
- 29 Macpherson, *Dreams & Visions*, 167.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *Ibid.*



- 32 NwTA, G1979, 003, Box 227-1, Yellowknife Vocational School, Progress Report, A.B. Boxer to J.M. Black, 9 Dec. 1958.
- 33 NwTA, G1979, 003, Box 227-1, Yellowknife Vocational School, Memo, A.B. Boxer to Mr. J. Black, 11 Oct. 1958.
- 34 NwTA, G1988, 004, Box 6, Dave Wattie interview.
- 35 Macpherson, *Dreams & Visions*, 193.
- 36 See for example NwTA, G1979, 003, Box 209-2, Quarterly Reports 1964, AR, Vocational Training, Mackenzie District, 1 Sept. 1962–26 Sept. 1963.
- 37 NwTA, G 1979, 003, Box 227-1, General: Yellowknife Vocational School, Supt. W.G. Booth to J. Jacobson, 14 Oct. 1958.
- 38 Macpherson, *Dreams & Visions*, 167, and NwTA, G1988, 004, Box 6, Dave Wattie transcript.
- 39 NwTA, G1988, 004, Box 5, Oral History Transcripts, Audie Dyer transcript.
- 40 Macpherson, *Dreams & Visions*, 169.
- 41 Macpherson, *Dreams & Visions*, 170; for much richer detail, see NwTA, G1988, 004, Box 6, Sir John Franklin School; for example, F.A. McColl, Area Administrator, to Administrator of the Mackenzie, 22 March 1961. For comment on the principal's resignation, see *NN*, 22 June 1961, 17.
- 42 For descriptions of the program of studies and difficulties of establishing it, see NwTA, G1979, 003, Box 227-1, Yellowknife Vocational School, J.M. Black, principal, Memo to Chief Superintendent Booth, Progress Report, October and November [1958]; NwTA, G1979, 003, Box 228-12, General—Sir John Franklin, W.G. Booth to J.M. Black, 7 July 1959.
- 43 See Johns, "History of Administration," 50.
- 44 On this point see the criticisms in NwTA, G1988, 004, Box 6, Dave Wattie interview. See also the photograph of girls in the home economics kitchen, Macpherson, *Dreams & Visions*, 177.
- 45 *NN*, 13 May 1955, 4.
- 46 See the comments in Principal Black's year-end report, NwTA, G1979, 003, Box 228-12, General—Sir John Franklin, J.M. Black to W.G. Booth, 6 April 1959.
- 47 Robertson, *Memoirs*, 144. For the official government justification for integration and the language of instruction, see also *ibid.*, 142-44, 154, 174-75.
- 48 Macpherson, *Dreams & Visions*, 167.
- 49 Despite the school's official academic standards; see for example J.M. Black and A.J. Boxer, "Bridging the Gap at Yellowknife," *North* VI, 2 (May–June 1959): 28-31; *Education North of 60*, 35; NwTA, G1979, 003, Box 227-3, Sir John Franklin, W.G. Booth to B.C. Gillie, 14 July 1964.
- 50 NwTA, G1979, 003, Box 227-1, Principal Black to Chief Supt. W.G. Booth, 26 Oct. 1958.
- 51 The numbers of students in high school, vocational, and pre-vocational classes are calculated from NwTA, G1979, 003, Box 228-11, Yellowknife Vocational School Reports, Registers, Sept. 1959.
- 52 NwTA, G1979, 003, Box 228-5, Sir John Franklin Reports, Principal's Annual Age-Grade Report, January 1964. By September 1966 more Indigenous students than in previous years were enrolled in academic classes, but the pattern was still evident: 186 whites, of whom 2 were in vocational and 24 in pre-vocational classes; 81 Indigenous, of whom 6 were in vocational and 40 in pre-vocational classes; NwTA, G1979, 003, Box 227-5, Sir John Franklin, registers, 30 Sept. 1966. Since "whites" included Métis, those numbers may partly mask the pattern; I suspect, for example, this may account for many of the 26 "white" students in vocational and pre-vocational classes.
- 53 For the daily timetable for resident students, see NwTA, G1979, 003, Box 227-1, Yellowknife Vocational School, Progress Report, A.B. Boxer to J.M. Black, 9 Dec. 1958.

- For commentary on the acculturation issue, see Black and Boxer, "Bridging the Gap," 28-31; NWTa, G1988, 004, Box 6, Dave Wattie interview.
- 54 See for example Macpherson, *Dreams & Visions*, 168, 172; NWTa, G1988, 004, Box 5, Audie Dyer; NWTa, G1979, 003, Box 228-11, Sir John Franklin, J.M. Black to Chief Superintendent, Progress Report, October and November [1958].
- 55 NWTa, G1979, 003, Box 227-1, Yellowknife Vocational School, Progress Report, A.B. Boxer to J.M. Black, 9 Dec. 1958.
- 56 The ages are recorded on the school registers; for example, see NWTa, G1979, 003, Box 228-11, Reports and Returns...1957-59, Students taking Vocational Training; NWTa, G1979, 003, Box 228-5, Sir John Franklin Reports 1963-64, Principal's Annual Age-Grade Reports, Jan. 1964. See also comment in NWTa, G1988, 004, Box 6, interview, Dave Wattie; Macpherson, *Dreams & Visions*, 237.
- 57 NWTa, G1979, 003, Box 228-11, Reports and Returns, Yellowknife Vocational and High School, 1957-59, J.M. Black, principal, Memo to Chief Superintendent Booth, Progress Report, October and November [1958], p. 7. See also *ibid.*, 003, Box 227-1, Yellowknife Vocational School, J.M. Black to W.G. Booth, 3 Nov. 1958.
- 58 NWTa, G1979, 003, Box 227-1, Yellowknife Vocational School, Progress Report, A.B. Boxer to J.M. Black, 9 Dec. 1958.
- 59 Such problems continued into the mid-1960s; for example, students expelled for infractions of rules and drinking problems: see for example NWTa, G1979, 003, Box 227-3, Sir John Franklin, W.G. Booth to B.C. Gillie, 14 July 1964, and *ibid.*, Box 228-6, Sir John Franklin, Reports 1964-65, A.J. Boxer, superintendent, Akaitcho Hall, to N. Macpherson, Regional Superintendent, 26 April 1965.
- 60 NWTa, 1979, 003, Box 213-4, Sir John Franklin, Quarterly Report, Oct.-Dec. 1963.
- 61 This was not so much the case in the separate school; most local Dene were Roman Catholic and a handful attended that school. See *AR*, DNANR, 1957-58, Appendix H, Report, Commissioner, 115.
- 62 NWTa, G1988, 004, Box 6, Dave Wattie interview. The interviewer, N.J. Macpherson, agreed that these attitudes continued "for a long time afterwards" and had "maybe not yet" disappeared.
- 63 NWTa, G1988, 004, Box 5, Oral History Transcripts, Audie Dyer transcript.
- 64 See for example the suggestive comment of Principal Black, who blamed the attitudes of hostile and disrespectful white students on notions they had absorbed from their parents, in Macpherson, *Dreams & Visions*, 171.
- 65 NWTa, G1988, 044, Box 6, Sir John Franklin School, J.M. Black, Principal, to P. Templeton, Asst. Area Administrator, Fort Smith, 18 April 1961, "Personal and Confidential." See also the comment on similar attitudes in *NN*, 13 April 1961, 6.
- 66 Macpherson, *Dreams & Visions*, 171; see also 168-69, 172.
- 67 See for example NWTa, G1988, 004, Box 5, Audie Dyer interview — mentioning Sir John student Charlie Watt, who among other things went on to be chief negotiator for the Inuit in the negotiations leading to the James Bay Agreement; for a brief biography see <https://indspire.ca/laureates/charlie-watt>. It seems likely that there were others as well. See also Heather E. McGregor, *Inuit Education and Schools in the Eastern Arctic* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 110-11, and "Listening," in this issue.