

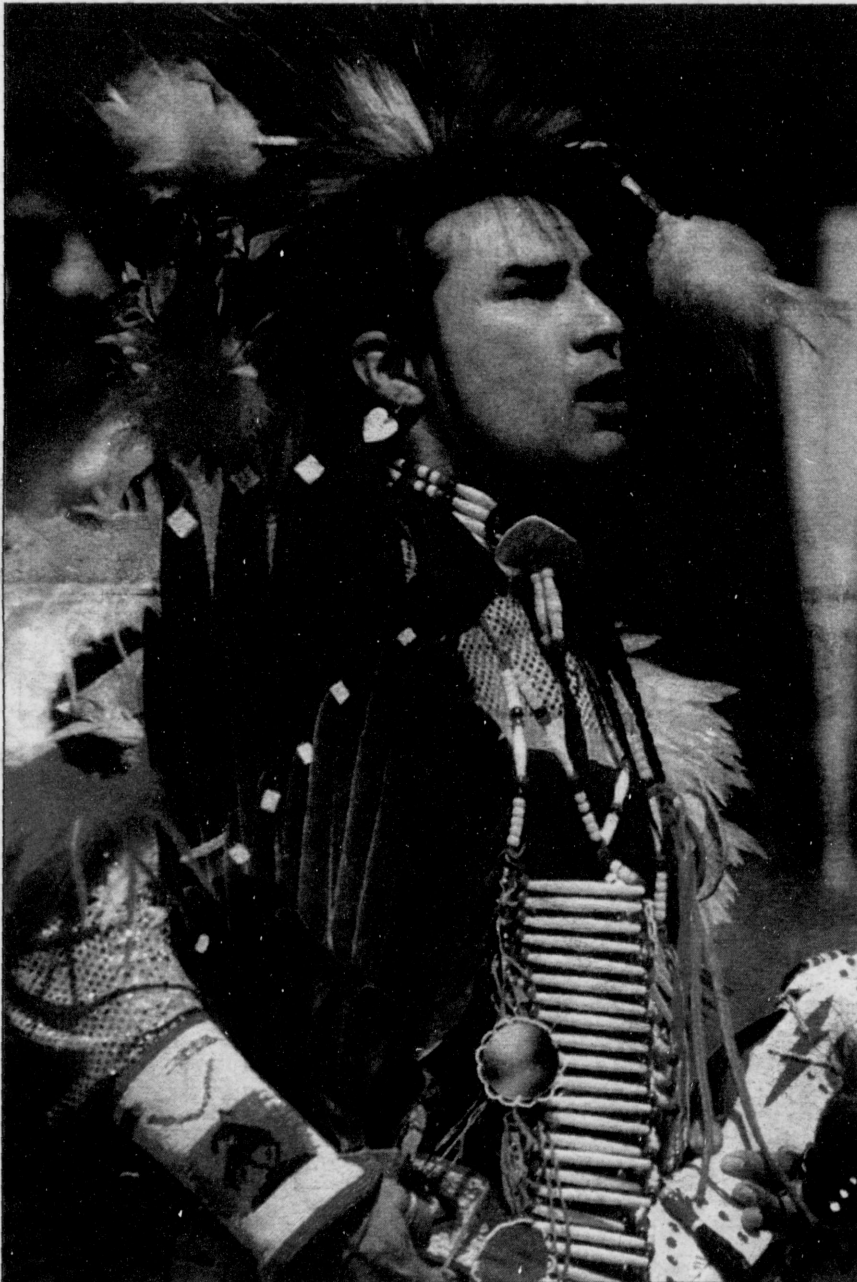
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PHONE 564-0005

Prairie/Dancer



Kevin Buffalo, a Prairie chicken dancer from Hobbema, AB, competed at the Save Our Rivers Powwow at Cottonwood Island Park during the weekend. JOHN MCKENZIE/FREE PRESS

▼ O'Grady

Management calls mediator

By MARK ALLAN

Free Press staff writer

As financial uncertainty swirls around O'Grady Catholic High School, mediator Stephen Rinfret has been appointed to help negotiate a first union contract for teachers.

The mediator was requested by management, confirms Clive Lyttle, Vancouver-based information officer for the B.C. Labor Relations Board. The school's three-man negotiating team wants to bring the negotiation to an "expeditious and successful conclusion," explains the director of education for the Diocese of Prince George. Ted West could not say whether negotiations had stalled over any specific issues, but he said management negotiators thought outside help would speed the process.

O'Grady teachers belong to the Catholic School Teachers' Association.

Negotiations are complicated by the fact the school announced last week it was offering only 12 teaching positions for the 1999-2000 school year due to a plunge in enrolment from 320 to 250. O'Grady currently has the equivalent of 22 full-time teaching positions.

Parents who attended an O'Grady school council meeting Monday sent a letter this week to Bishop Gerald Wiesner, Mr. West and the school council listing their concerns. In the letter they also ask the school to reinstate the laid-off teachers and current courses including computers, sports, drama and a self-improvement program called campus ministry.

"We're asking them to put their faith in us to help create a team to bring back parents" to enrol their children, says parent spokesman Greg Beattie, who adds that parents have asked for the expired registration deadline to be extended. It's important, he says, to have a commitment to reinstate teachers before parents lobby for the school. "Otherwise it's like selling refrigerators to Eskimos."

The parents, who insist they support O'Grady administration and diocese officials, also ask for "renewed financial support from the diocese officials until enrolment is at a maximum."

Mr. West and Bishop Wiesner confirm the diocese, which essentially covers northern B.C., has covered the school's annual deficits for years.

The diocese has ended that practice, says Mr. West. Joe Haddock, chair of the elected school council, confirms the council has been instructed to balance the budget.

Mr. West says he can't reveal the amount of the deficits, but figures supplied by parents from reports by chartered account Robert de Grace reveal total deficits of almost \$1.5 million beginning in 1987. No figure is available for 1996. Deficits range from a high of \$272,000 in 1987 to a low of \$34,000 in 1993. The deficit was \$202,739 last year.

"We've known all along that the school has run a deficit," Beattie says. "We consider that to be the diocese's share of operating a Catholic school."

The school council, says Mr. Haddock, gets an annual per-student subsidy of \$125 from the diocese. O'Grady receives about \$3,000 per student from the Education Ministry, which is half of the operating cost

Turn to Concerned, A2

Suicide risk among gay youth greater than normal

By MICHELLE LANG

Free Press staff writer

It is upsetting but not surprising that gay youth in Prince George and around B.C. are at a high risk of committing suicide,

says a local gay rights activist.

Almost half of the half of the gay and lesbian youth surveyed in "Being Out," a new study by the McCreary Centre, had attempted suicide at least once. A quarter of the youth surveyed had attempted

suicide in the past year. And according to Darren Francks, chair of the Gay and Lesbian Association North, this is an unfortunate fact of life for many young people who are gay or lesbian.

"There have been hundreds of other reports around North America that substantiate the same thing that this study shows. Hopefully this report will bring some awareness to the fact that this is also a major issue here. It's almost

in epidemic proportions," says Mr. Francks.

The study, which examined 77 youth in Prince George and four other B.C. communities, also says that gay teens are at a greater risk

Turn to Gay, A2