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Northern students lobby for long-promised school

Arielle Godbout, *The Ottawa Citizen*

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After eight years of waiting for a new school, students from Attawapiskat in northern Ontario have had enough.

The group of 21 Grade 8 students cancelled their graduation trip to Niagara Falls and came to Ottawa to protest instead.

They held a news conference on Parliament Hill yesterday morning to describe the condition of the portables they use for classrooms — windows and doors that don't always close, ceilings that leak and washrooms with very little privacy.

"They're just all scattered buildings and we

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always have to walk 10 minutes just to go to gym," said student Shannen Koostachin. "I got sick twice from coming out of the gym all sweaty and cold."

She said it's also embarrassing and disruptive because the washrooms are in the same portable as the classroom.

"We ... are the generation of students who have never seen a real school," Chris Kataquapit

said. "That is why we made the decision to come to Ottawa."

Attawapiskat is an isolated reserve near James Bay that is only accessible by plane. The community's school was closed in 2000 after students and teachers became sick due to contamination from a diesel spill, said Charlie Angus, MP for Timmins-James Bay.

The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs promised a new school at the time, but the students have been waiting ever since, he said.

"Indian Affairs gets away with this kind of thing because it's out of sight, out of mind," Mr. Angus said.

Assembly of First Nations National Chief Phil Fontaine, who met with students later in the day, said Attawapiskat is just one of 40 aboriginal communities across Canada that is lacking adequate school facilities.

"We ask ourselves if the response from government would have been different if this was a situation in Toronto, Ottawa, (or) any urban community in the country," Chief Fontaine said.

He has invited the students to join him today for the national day of action in support of First Nations.

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