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Student lobbies for school at Attawapiskat

Letter, petition campaign to get kids out of portable classrooms

Posted By **BY MARC CAPANCIONI, SPECIAL TO THE STAR**

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Mitchell Case, a Grade 12 student at Korah Collegiate, isn't afraid to stand up for what he believes in.

When he heard that the Attawapiskat First Nation on James Bay didn't have an elementary school, he took action.

The old school was contaminated by a diesel spill in 1979 and closed in 2000. Eight years later, Attawapiskat's 400 elementary students, who live in one of the harshest climates in the province, are still being taught in portable classrooms.

Plans have been made to construct a new building, but it never materialized.

"I heard about the school and thought, 'This is Canada, and this shouldn't be happening,'" said Case.

With his principal, Holly Wicket, he collected 130 letters and more than 400 petition signatures and sent them to Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, responsible for First Nations education.

Students and staff from Korah, Central Algoma and W. C. Eaket secondary schools, along with Rosedale, Aweres and H. M. Robbins

elementary schools, were involved.

"We build schools overseas, and that's fine, but we should build them here, too," said the 17-year-old.

Portables don't provide the shelter that children need, said Tesla Koostachin, a summer student at the Attawapiskat First Nation Education Authority.

School is often cancelled because of the cold and, sometimes, the door freezes shut, she said.



"I don't want my (younger sister) to go to school here. We may move."

Building a new school is "very important," she added.

However, despite the pleas, the government has no plans to replace portables.

"A new school in Attawapiskat is not currently in the (plans)," said Margot Geduld, spokesperson for Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.

The ministry uses a "prioritization model" to dish out funds. A new school is "not part of the region's capital plans," she said.

Timmins- James Bay MP Charlie

Angus said he thinks this is unacceptable. "No other community -- other than an isolated First Nation -- would have to (put up with this)," said the New Democrat.

While much of the blame should be placed on Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl and the current government, there's plenty to go around, said Angus.

"We've had over eight years to do something.

"It's part of the ongoing, systemic negligence (toward the First Nations)."

Building a school in Attawapiskat would cost

around \$25 million to \$30 million, said Sault Ste. Marie MP Tony Martin, calling that a mere drop in the bucket.

"That's not a lot of money when you consider the government is going around talking about \$200 billion in tax relief over the next five years," he said.

"Why a piece of that couldn't be invested in infrastructure for our First Nations doesn't make sense to me. It's not logical."

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