



School excuses insulting: MP

Attawapiskat hasn't had a school in 10 years

Posted By BRANDON WALKER, SUN MEDIA; TIMMINS DAILY PRESS

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A new school was never in the plans for the children of Attawapiskat, says a representative with Indian and Native Affairs Canada.

Joseph Young, the acting associate regional director general for Ontario North with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, said the Minister Chuck Strahl, has no say in the department's capital plan.

"I think it's very important to realize the process is independent of anything that happens in Ottawa," he said.

"A capital committee looks at all different proposals. (The list) is reprioritized every few years based on a number of factors, such as over crowding, health and safety ... and we plan around that over X number of years."

MP Charlie Angus (NDP -- Timmins-James Bay) said Strahl needs to give his bureaucrats better excuses.

"If Strahl doesn't make the decisions, then who does?" Angus said. Former minister "Jim Prentice wrote a letter to the community saying he was ready to take the plan to the treasury to have the school built, then the next minister comes in and cancels it."

Angus called the whole situation "an insult to families and children in Attawapiskat."

"It's laughable now to say there's somehow a committee and Strahl has nothing to do with it."

Young was asked if he examined the portables during a visit to Attawapiskat in April.

"Yes I did," Young said. "I went with the regional director general, Deb Richardson."

"At that time did you identify any structural problems going through the portables?" Grech asked.

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"I went through two of them," Young said.

"I talked with one of the janitors I think, or two of the janitors, but I didn't crawl underneath to see if there was any problems," Young said.

"They seem to be ... they're portable classrooms. As I mentioned earlier, there are a lot of communities that would like to have a new elementary or new high school. I didn't see any structural damage but I want to qualify that by saying I didn't do a detailed inspection either."

A Sun Media editor took a trip to Attawapiskat earlier this year and witnessed portables which were damaged due to shifting foundations, door frames with cracks, windows that wouldn't close, emergency exits that wouldn't open without force and cracks in drywall.

"Were these things you didn't see?" Ron Grech asked.

"It was a quick visit in and out," Young said.

"But I think what's important to mention is we provide a fair bit of money to the Attawapiskat Education Authority and to the chief and council for what we call operation and maintenance of a particular classroom or, in this case, if that's the kind of thing that's evident, they can send an application in.

"I've not seen an application. I've never had any of my staff come to me and say they're requesting this and that."

He added Indian and Northern Affairs Canada has provided \$3.3-million for portables and to the sprinklers, but no other requests have come across his desk.

"We could provide (funds) to do this," he said.

Young said the region he covers is one of the largest in Canada, with 127 First Nations and a capital budget of \$125-126 million, which is meant for water treatment plants, schools, sewers and other important items.

"We've always been open and transparent with our communities to say 'here's the situation we're in,' " Young said.

"I continually have that all through the North. A big priority of mine is I travel all through the North and address both of those issues."

Angus said Indian and Northern Affairs Canada agreed to build the school and can't cry poor now.

"Look at the communities in Ontario that are in fourth world conditions," he said. "The reality is Attawapiskat had banked financing to build the school."

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