

Editorial

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Students call out Strahl

Posted 5 hours ago

Citizens rely on all levels of government to make daily decisions that impact our lives. Collectively, the federal, provincial and municipal levels manage billions of our tax dollars - funds garnered from citizens, business and industry.

As taxpayers, we expect our governments to make decisions on spending this money based largely on need. It is impossible to please everyone - one person's pet project is another person's example of wasteful spending.

Canadians also expect governments of all political stripes to keep its word in terms of spending promises.

If we, as citizens, have reason to believe these ideals are not being upheld, then we have the right to call out our leaders. This is a cornerstone of democracy.

On Thursday, three graduating students from Attawapiskat - Chris Kataaquapit, Shannen Koostachin and Solomon Rae - exercised this basic democratic right. The young trio gave up a trip to Niagara Falls to celebrate their graduation. Instead, they journeyed to Parliament Hill to meet with federal Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs Chuck Strahl.

In 2000, a massive diesel leak forced the closure of Attawapiskat's school. Since then, about 400 students have been taught solely in portables. Remember, this is a remote community in the Far North. Weather is much more of a factor there than in sunny southern Ontario.

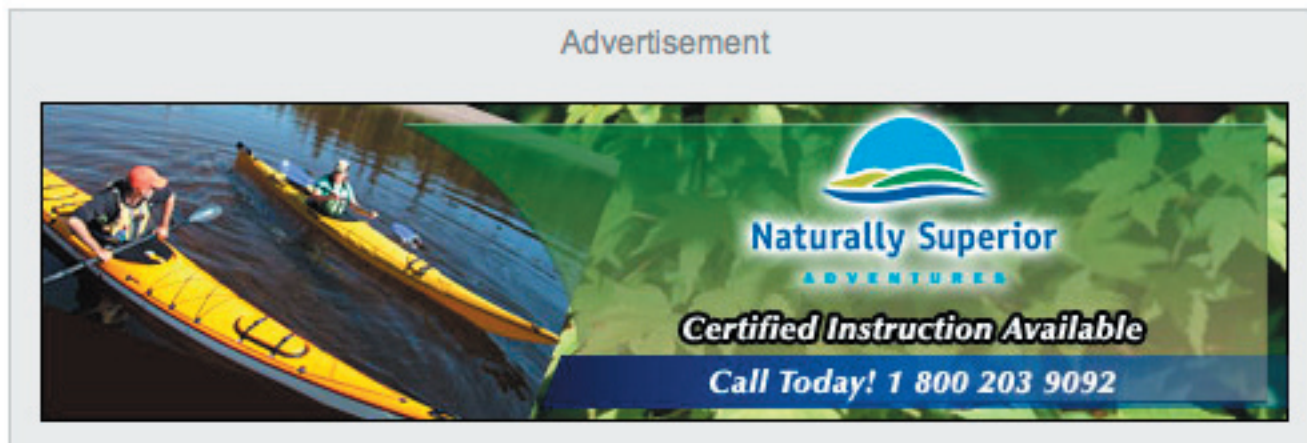
The government promised a new school would be built this year. But a sudden change in department spending priorities resulted in the promise being broken. The Canadian Press reported that Strahl maintains the situation isn't "ideal," but it doesn't constitute a health and safety crisis.

Kataaquapit, Koostachin and Rae called the minister on this broken promise.

And with good reason. Considering the financial resources available to the federal government, it is hard to fathom the relatively small amount of money needed to build a proper school in Attawapiskat is not available.

How much money does the Canadian government spend every year? Here is a sample breakdown of federal spending, as taken from the annual report of the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat for 2006-07: \$89.3 billion on economic affairs; \$33.9 billion on public debt servicing; \$42.2 billion on social affairs; \$25.1 billion on international affairs; \$10.6 billion on government affairs; \$9.5 billion on tax credits and repayments; \$11.4 billion on accrual and other adjustments; and \$1.5 billion on consolidated specified purpose accounts.

Still, there is no funding available to build a decent facility in Attawapiskat. Nothing fancy, just a basic building to provide children with a warm and healthy environment while they learn. No funds available, neither today nor in the next five years.



Obviously, the three selfless grads were disappointed with the outcome of their meeting Thursday.

"Today, I feel down because Minister Chuck Strahl said he didn't have the money to build our new school," Koostachin told reporters in Ottawa. "I didn't believe it. It's not right."

Regardless of the outcome, these three young adults still have plenty of which to be proud. They made a personal sacrifice for a cause close to their heart. They are thinking of others, the next generation of students in their community. And they voiced their concerns peacefully, exercising their democratic right.

Our leaders in Ottawa could learn a lot from this trio from the Far North. Too bad they aren't listening.

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