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Strahl rejects student plea for school; 'Campaign of hope' won't stop

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A new approach to Attawapiskat's school problems resulted in the same answer: No.

During Thursday's First Nations Day of Action, three students from Attawapiskat made another plea for a new school to federal Indian and Northern Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl. The students gave up a planned graduation trip to Niagara Falls to meet Strahl in Ottawa, with MP Charlie Angus (NDP - Timmins-James Bay).

Students in the remote Native community have been forced to attend classes in portables since the school was closed due to fuel contamination. Originally, the federal government promised to rebuild the school, but the project was shelved in December.

The students' efforts did not change Strahl's position. The school project won't proceed this year. While the students were upset, Angus said it is still a campaign of hope.

"Canadians are asking 'how is it they can't get a school?' I think this government has disgraced itself. Strahl doesn't live up to his obligations as minister, but they will get a school," said Angus.

"We aren't going to sit back and just hope that it'll happen."

The students, however, received a warmer reception from another political body Wednesday. The Ontario Public School Board Association pledged the support of 72 school boards across the province for the cause.

When Solomon Rae stood up in front of a national audience on Wednesday in Ottawa, his message was clear. The Grade 8 student from JR Nakogee School in Attawapiskat wants to attend a school just like every other non-First Nation child in this country. Solomon and two of his peers spoke during the National Day of Action.

"We want what every other kid in Canada takes for granted - we want a school. A safe school. A clean school. A school that will give our young people hope.

"Mr. Strahl, you have the power to give us a school."

Shannen Koostachin said three years ago her sister also came to Ottawa, pleading for a new school.

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"She sat in on a meeting where Andy Scott, (former) Minister of INAC, promised us a school. But I ask, why do I have to come back and do the same thing again? As young people we are told to stand up for our promises. But our own government cannot keep a promise that they made three times. Chuck Strahl needs to keep his word."

Chris Kataaquapit said the people of Attawapiskat have waited long enough.

"We, the Grade 8 students, are the the generation of students who have never seen a real school. That is why we came to Ottawa."

Angus said the Attawapiskat school fight has brought to the public's attention the federal government's refusal to build schools across the country.

To date, Angus has received support from thousands of students and several school boards.

"The Ontario High School Association also offered its support," Angus said. "Next week, we're meeting with the Toronto District School Board, who want Attawapiskat campaign posters in all of its schools."

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