

Editorial

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Building school not Strahl's call

Posted By

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Chuck Strahl might be Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, but he has no power over the construction of schools on First Nations.

That stunning revelation was made by Joseph Young, INAC's acting associate regional director general for Ontario North, during a conference call with Daily Press editorial staff on Tuesday. The meeting was set up to allow INAC officials an opportunity to brief us on the chronology that has taken place since the decision was made to close J. R. Nakogee Elementary School.

Young silenced the room when he emphasized decisions about capital spending for schools -- or other facilities -- on First Nations are made by a regional branch of that ministry, not Strahl or any of his predecessors.

Clearly, such statements give Strahl the opportunity to wash his hands of Attawapiskat and its school needs. He can say it's not his decision but one that's being made on a more "local" level.

Generally when one talks of local-level decision making, the presumption is regional officials conduct due diligence, they have a good handle of all the details within their jurisdiction and will allocate funds based on the most pressing needs.

Unfortunately, Young didn't leave anyone on the editorial board with the impression that he has a real good handle of the condition of the portables the students in Attawapiskat are being schooled in.

He seemed completely unaware of any problems with the portables.

At one point during the interview, he was asked if he had examined the portables and identified any obvious structural problems when he had visited Attawapiskat in April. Young said he went through two of the portables and didn't see any problems.

It was pointed outThe Daily Presssent an editor to Attawapiskat earlier this year who was given a tour of the portables. He saw evidence of damage due to foundations shifting. There were classroom windows that wouldn't close properly, emergency exits that required force to open, and large cracks in door frames and drywall leading up to the ceiling.

Young admitted he didn't see any of that but then qualified his statement by, saying, "It was a quick visit, in and out."

How confident can anyone be in INAC evaluating the school needs of our First Nations when ministry officials seem oblivious to obvious problems with the facilities?

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It's a good thing INAC is not responsible for inspecting nuclear plants or we'd all be in trouble.

Even so, perhaps the biggest hurdle identified by Young is the lack of federal funding allocated for capital projects on First Nations.

Young said the region he oversees is one of the largest in Canada with 127 First Nations. He manages a capital budget of \$126 million to be used for water treatment plants, schools, sewage systems and other important projects for that area.

It would require a firm commitment from the government to set aside more than \$20 million of that budget to build a new school on one First Nation. And as Young said, a new school for Attawapiskat is nowhere on the map to begin with.

While INAC's Ontario North regional section may claim responsibility for determining whether to spend money on a new school, it's the politicians who determine how much money is to be allocated to sections within the bureaucracy.

And it's the politicians the First Nation leaders need to continue targeting in hopes of seeing any improvement to the elementary school facilities in Attawapiskat.

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