

School boards join reserve fight

Ontario students encouraged to write letters calling for funds to build school for Attawapiskat children

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
LOUISE BROWN
EDUCATION REPORTER

They sit scattered in portables so run down the James Bay wind can blow through cracks in the wall. Twice this winter pipes have frozen, leaving students nowhere to go but home.

It has been eight years since parents in Attawapiskat, in Ontario's northern woodland, pulled their children out of the town's grade school because of contaminated soil and moved them to what they thought would be temporary portables. But the 400 students still suit up in boots and coats every time they visit the school library, computer room or special education class or the town gym – then do it all over again when they head back to class.

So poor is this setting for learning, it's no wonder some children here drop out by Grade 8, says Attawapiskat principal Stella Wesley.

"Portables aren't the whole problem, but they make children feel very isolated in a community already segregated from the rest of society," said Wesley, whose students are at the heart of a national push for federal funding for a new school.

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 BOOKMARK 

Ontario's public school boards will encourage their 2.1 million students to write letters to the federal department of Indian and Northern Affairs to urge funding for a new school in this northern Cree community, after eight years of waiting for funding from successive federal governments.

Several schools plan to lead a student awareness campaign for Attawapiskat, including Toronto's Neil McNeil Catholic Secondary School and The Student School, a public alternative school.

"All children have the right to a quality education, and we want the students of Attawapiskat to know their peers care about them," said Waterloo trustee Catherine Fife, vice-president of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association.

The boards are responding to NDP MP Charlie Angus' YouTube call for the public to push Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl for funds for a new school in Attawapiskat, to replace the one contaminated in 1979 by a toxic diesel spill.

An Indian Affairs spokesperson told the *Star* this week there are no plans or timetables for when a new school might be built in Attawapiskat, even though government officials had said last fall one was in the works.

But federal officials say an unexpected fire in another native community meant having to replace it at a cost of \$13 million, pushing the Attawapiskat school off the current waiting list.

"There's not a single other school in the country that is made up entirely of portables with no main building. It's unacceptable in the 21st century, especially given the dropout rate among First Nations children," said Angus, whose riding of Timmins-James Bay includes the struggling fly-in reserve.

Ontario's public school boards' association has cited aboriginal learning as a top priority and launched a number of initiatives to try to close the learning gap between native and non-native children.

"We've reached a new low in Ontario if a community like this is not even on a waiting list for a new school," said Fife.

Information on the campaign for a new school is at www.attawapiskat-school.com.
