

YouTube used in fight for new school

Native community says it has been waiting for almost 30 years

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OTTAWA—An NDP MP has launched a campaign on YouTube to embarrass the federal government into building a long-awaited elementary school in the northern native community of Attawapiskat.

Charlie Angus (Timmins) said the community has been waiting for almost 30 years to get a new school for 400 students to replace one finally closed in 2000 because of diesel fuel contamination. The students have been in makeshift classrooms ever since.

"By the weekend it was the third most watched political video on YouTube Canada," Angus said, acknowledging he got the idea for Students Helping Students from a Grade 6 student in Cobalt, Ont.

"It would never have occurred to me in a million years but that's where they go to look for information. Actually I didn't think we would get much out of it. I just wanted to put something that any Grade 6 kid (across Canada) would get enough information that they could go to their class and say 'Why don't we take up the fight?'" Angus said yesterday.

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The Fight for a School in Attawapiskat video, put to the tune of Ben E. King's "Stand By Me," speaks to the trail of broken promises by three Indian Affairs ministers to build a replacement school in the community 1,300 kilometres north of Toronto on James Bay.

Officials at the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs could not be reached for comment.

Angus said so far 15 schools have signed a petition, agreeing to put pressure on the federal government to build the school.

In 1979, a 50,000-litre diesel spill pooled under J.R. Nakogee School and after years of seeing students get sick from contamination parents finally pulled them out in frustration 21 years later.

There have been promises on and off for almost 30 years to replace the school, but Angus says the community and local native band is no further ahead now that the Conservative government has said building native schools is not a priority.

He said the first promises came from Robert Nault, the former Liberal minister of Indian and northern affairs in July 2000. Then it was former Liberal minister Andy Scott in November 2005 who gave the go-ahead to rebuild the school. Finally the project landed in former Conservative Indian Affairs Minister Jim Prentice's lap.

"He seemed to be moving forward with it and then in December, this was one of a number of schools where the word came down from the new minister, Chuck Strahl, that building schools was not going to be a priority for First Nations spending," Angus said. Residents had hoped work on the \$30 million school would begin in spring.

"When all is said and done it will be 40 years from the poisoning of the school property to fixing it. I think any average Canadian would recognize that that is completely unacceptable," said Angus. "It is institutional educational apartheid."