



# National

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## Native pupils ask Strahl for school

But minister rejects plea for new building

**BILL CURRY**

May 30, 2008

OTTAWA -- Young Toronto teacher Carinna Pellett was eager to land a job in Ontario after two years working in Kiribati, a poor island nation in the Pacific Ocean.

But when she started her job last fall, she was shocked to find many of the same Third World conditions she had left behind. Her Grade 8 classroom is a former maintenance shed. Children wear winter coats and tuques in their portable classrooms because the door won't close. In Attawapiskat, a James Bay community with more than 400 school-age children, students have been in limbo since the community school was closed in 2000. Ever since, the school has been simply several portables.

"I accepted it when I was in the Third World country because I knew when I was going that this is what it was going to be like," Ms. Pellett, 28, said. "When I went up to Attawapiskat, I couldn't even believe I was in my own province."

Many of Ms. Pellett's students campaigned for a new school three years ago. The previous Liberal government promised them that one would be built by 2008. But when the Conservatives said there would be no new school, the children stepped up their efforts. One student made a PowerPoint presentation and put it on YouTube. A website was created to post updates on the campaign. With help from local MP Charlie Angus, they managed to get attention from non-native students and teachers across the province.

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Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl's office was flooded with hundreds of letters from Southern Ontario children urging him to build a school in Attawapiskat, a neighbour of Kashechewan, a troubled James Bay native community farther north.

Sensing momentum, Attawapiskat student Jonah Sutherland persuaded his class to scrap plans for a school trip to Niagara Falls and meet the minister in Ottawa instead.

Students at St. Edmund Campion Secondary School in Brampton, Ont., who had been leading a letter-writing campaign decided to come to Ottawa to meet the children they had been trying to help.

Together, the kids from Brampton and Attawapiskat led hundreds of others in a march to Parliament Hill as part of the National Day of Action. "How many schools can Chuck Chuck stall?" read their banner. Meanwhile, three of the Attawapiskat students had a 45-minute private meeting with the minister to make their pitch. They were told they would have to wait. No date for a new school was offered.

"I cried and some of my friends cried and some of my elders cried," said Shannen Koostachin, 13, one of the students at the meeting. "When I shook his hand, I told him that we're not going to quit."

Speaking later with reporters, Mr. Strahl said the easy thing to do would have been to promise a new school. But he said at least 30 or 40 other communities have

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more pressing needs. "These schools, these portables, I admit, are less than ideal, but they're not a health and safety issue," he said. "If there's a door that's not working or a window that's stuck or something, the community gets a million dollars [a year] for operation and maintenance."

Mr. Angus, the local MP, said the government is hiding the fact that it has slashed budgets for reserve schools.


"This minister simply doesn't want to build a school in Attawapiskat," he said. "There is no waiting list. There is no timeline. He should simply say that to the Canadian people and stop misrepresenting what has happened under his watch."


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 Letter to Editor

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