

EDITORIAL

Misplaced priorities

Mar 11, 2008 04:30 AM

For eight years, children in Attawapiskat have been going to school in cramped portable classrooms after health concerns over decades-old diesel fuel contamination closed the local school.

In most parts of Canada, such appalling conditions would spark public outcry and quick government action. But in Attawapiskat, a remote First Nations reserve on Ontario's James Bay coast, parents and children are being told they will just have to wait for a new school.


"I just can't tell them right now when it is going to be built," says Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl.


Strahl's lack of a sense of urgency on this file is troubling. His department is responsible for on-reserve education, yet building a new school in Attawapiskat appears to be low on the list of priorities for Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government.

NDP MP Charlie Angus, who represents the riding of Timmins-James Bay, says successive Indian Affairs ministers, both Conservative and Liberal, have promised to replace the school. According to Angus, in December the Conservative government suddenly put on hold a well-developed plan to build a new school in Attawapiskat.


Attawapiskat may be a sign of a larger problem. Last week, Strahl told the Commons standing committee on aboriginal affairs that five years ago his department identified 29 school projects that have been put off due to lack of funding. Only 12 of them are scheduled to start in the 2008-09 budget year, and Attawapiskat isn't one of them.


A government that has the money for tax breaks but not for rebuilding and repairing decaying aboriginal schools is a government with a wrong sense of priorities.

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