

EDUCATION IS A RIGHT

The Attawapiskat Human Rights Forum

On November 26, 2008 in an institution of higher learning dedicated to education, students, teachers and community leaders gathered to speak out against an injustice. This injustice would be considered an atrocity in any third world country, but the fact that it is occurring in Canada, one of the richest countries in the world, makes this situation that much more shameful.

The community of Attawapiskat sits on the shores of James Bay in Northern Ontario. Attawapiskat is a Cree community of about 1900 people. Tradition, family and education are core values of this tightly knit community. In 1979 a diesel leak occurred underneath J.R. Nagokee Elementary School. Over the ensuing years as much as 30,000 gallons of diesel fuel spilled into the surrounding terrain poisoning the grade school and surrounding homes. Reports of nausea, sickness, headaches and general poor health amongst the children went unheeded by the federal government. The community has lost track of the number of people who have cancer or who have died from related diseases. It is the desire of this community and its supporters that, even though it falls under the Ministry of Indian Affairs, the same standards of the Ontario Ministry of Education should apply.

This situation was allowed to continue for over twenty years until 2000 when families, frustrated by the refusal of Indian Affairs to address the toxic levels in the classrooms, decided to pull their children out of the school. The government offered to repair the school. However, when the children refused to return to the toxic environment in the school, the money was diverted to set up *temporary portables* while a new school was planned.

The timeline after this date continued as follows:

- July 2000 - Indian Affairs Minister Robert Nault promised to build a new school.
- November 2005 - Indian Affairs Minister Andy Scott guaranteed that the school would be built.
- December 2006 - In a letter to then Chief Mike Carpenter of Attawapiskat, Conservative Minister Jim Prentice stated his commitment to a new school: "I plan to support your funding request at the Treasury Board."
- July 2007 - Brian Holmes of Indian Affairs confirmed in

writing that Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) was willing to finalize details on the project so that "this acceptance will allow the new elementary school to move forward to the next stage of development."

- December 2007 - Incoming Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl cancelled plans to build a new school. No reasons were given.

The children of Attawapiskat have been without a school for over eight years. Prior to that, they were forced to live and learn in substandard conditions that threatened their health and well-being. It is unknown what the long-term health ramifications of the exposure to the toxins will be.

Tara Williams of Simcoe taught in Attawapiskat for nine years and she had her children enrolled there. Hers is a heartfelt story of the community she knew: the Halloween parades through the hallways; the halls decorated for Christmas, Easter and the major events in the life of the school. Interclass connections became a thing of the past. The entire Attawapiskat community had used the school as its gathering place for celebrations and meetings. The community no longer had its center, its focal point.

The reality of the education system in Attawapiskat is demonstrated through the attendance rate of students, which starts declining as early as Grade 4. The dropout rate increases as the students continue to feel disconnected from the school. Students who, prior to 2000, moved freely to the library or the gymnasium were forced to get dressed before encountering the blistering cold and snow to move from one area to another. In a country that prides itself on literacy and physical fitness these two points alone smack in the face of all that educators know and believe to be true and beneficial to our students.



The year 2008 saw the frustration of the community and the province at large come to a head. Surprisingly it was not the adults who came forward. It was the children of Attawapiskat, who grew weary of the dire situation and decided to act.

- In January the national media described the school situation in Attawapiskat as “educational apartheid.”
- An online campaign to raise awareness garnered responses from thousands of students. Nearly 76,000 people have seen the Attawapiskat campaign video.
- In May pupils led a National Day of Action in Ottawa.
- In July Attawapiskat pupil Shannon Koostachin, a leading spokesperson and former student of J.R. Nakogee School, was nominated for the International Children’s Peace Prize.
- In July the children of Attawapiskat informed the Canadian government that they intend to challenge the government at the upcoming UN review of Canada’s obligations under the Rights of the Child Convention.

The children were taking the lead and the drive was gaining momentum. What was needed was a forum in which the students could articulate their message loudly and clearly and mobilize the masses to their plight. The community beyond Attawapiskat, recognizing the injustice of forcing education to occur in a myriad of bleak portables while the rest of the province and country were housed in actual school buildings, began to organize. The list of participants behind the scenes is a who’s who of education and community leadership in Ontario and around the country. Community leaders from the Cree nation and Mushkegowok Council gathered the students. Charlie Angus, MP for Timmins-James Bay, used his skills to organize the various groups. Educational leaders worked within their communities to raise awareness. Toronto Catholic District School Board educational leaders organized the venue and prepared to welcome the masses to Toronto.

On November 26, 2008 the first ever *Education is a Human Right* conference held by the children of Attawapiskat took place at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. The day started with a celebration of culture. A powerful drum display filled the auditorium with an energy that set the tone for the day. Five hundred intermediate and senior students from all over Ontario arrived to join in the cause. As students sat and listened to the speakers, they were reminded of the comfort in which they go to school each day. Canadians see education as a basic human right and a school building is necessary for this education to occur. This fact was never far from the minds of the participants.

The day was filled with powerful speakers: politicians, educational leaders and health researchers. Grand Chief Stan Loutit, arousing the crowd as few people can, gave his impression of the situation:

- Canada has a Treaty, a fiduciary and moral obligation to the people of Attawapiskat. Leaving a community without a proper school is unjust. If Canada thinks that the people and especially the young people of Attawapiskat will forget about this issue, they are wrong. We are not giving up!
- Education is a basic human right. Only in First Nations communities such as Attawapiskat is the lack of proper education facilities allowed to exist. This is Canada, the land of the rich, the *Promised Land*. It is shameful that the government is allowing this to happen.
- The youth have not given up. They will continue the fight. Their heart is in it. We as leaders are behind them all the way. The fight must continue.

The adults spoke; however the children carried the day. It was their message that the students had come to hear and that the student leaders of Ontario intended to bring back to their school communities. It was the message of the students of Attawapiskat

that will leave a lasting impression on the participants of this youth forum. It is the personal stories that resonate. The stories of having to dress for the weather every time the students need to move to another room. It is the story of children feeling guilt when they move to another school outside the Attawapiskat community knowing that their family and friends are still learning in sub-standard conditions. It is the personal struggle of a Grade 6 boy named Pierce, forced to trudge his wheelchair, his backpack and lunch through ruts formed in the mud as he tries to manoeuvre over makeshift pathways made of discarded industrial skids.

It was the message of the students, which motivated the audience to action. They were asked directly to take up the struggle. To start and continue letter writing campaigns to demonstrate to government officials and educational authorities the sentiment and desire to bring justice to the people of Attawapiskat. There are plans in progress to hold a rally in Ottawa, to put a face to the fight and to meet personally the power players in Ottawa who are making the decisions that directly affect the lives of these students.

In the words of Serena Koostachin, sister of Shannon: "We are the children who have spent our entire lives sitting at the back of the bus. We aren't going to sit at the back any longer." The movement is growing.

For more information on the conference and to access videos of the presentations, visit www.attawapiskat-school.com.

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CPCO invites submissions to its quarterly magazine, *Principal Connections*. Share your experiences, strategies and celebrations with colleagues across the province.

There are a variety of ways to submit your story or article.

- Write it yourself and e-mail it to editor@cpco.on.ca.
- Submit the details of the story in point form and we will do the writing.
- Call us and we will arrange an interview with you and write the story.
- If you have an idea for a story, e-mail or call us and we will do the follow-up.

Articles should be approximately 700 words. Pictures should be a minimum of 300 dpi resolution and in jpg or tiff formats. Please do not reduce the size of digital images.

All contributions by our members are truly appreciated. Please understand that a submission does not automatically guarantee publication. CPCO reserves the right to edit all materials.

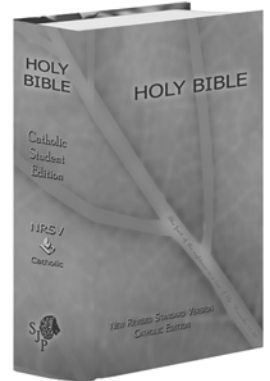
The deadline for articles to the summer issue of *Principal Connections* is **May 18, 2009**. If you have any questions or suggestions regarding the magazine contact the editor Marisa Celenza or the managing editor Nelly Kelders at the CPCO office.

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