



our
dreams
matter
too

**First Nations
children's rights, lives,
and education**

An alternate report from the
Shannen's Dream Campaign to the
United Nations Committee on the
Rights of the Child on the occasion of
Canada's 3rd and 4th periodic reviews



*Our daughter Shannen,
You were a inspirational leader
and worked very hard for equality.
Your legacy will live on.*

Hi-Ho mistahey!

*Sadly missed by
Mom and Dad, siblings*



Dedicated to the memory of Shannen Koostachin,
Founder of Shannen's Dream



“It is unacceptable in Canada that First Nations children cannot attend a safe and healthy school. It is unacceptable in Canada for First Nations education to languish with outdated laws, policies and funding practices that do not support basic standards. It is time for fairness and equity. Shannen Koostachin stood up for justice so the young people coming behind her might have an equal opportunity for a quality education in her community, just like young people have in communities throughout Canada. Now is the time for fairness, justice, and equity. Now is the time to realize Shannen’s Dream.”

— Shawn Atleo, National Chief, Assembly of First Nations

Our Dreams Matter Too: First Nations children's rights, lives, and education

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on the occasion of Canada's 3rd and 4th periodic reviews



Provincial Advocate
for Children & Youth

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Foreword

The First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada and the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth are honoured to work with First Nations and non-First Nations children and youth to submit this alternate report on First Nations education on reserves to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child on the occasion of Canada's 3rd and 4th periodic review. Repeated expert reports, including that of the Auditor General of Canada, have found that the Canadian Government provides lower levels of funding for First Nations schools and education on reserve than the provinces and territories do for students under their jurisdiction. The longstanding inequity in First Nations education means that many First Nations children are denied an opportunity to receive a culturally based education in a proper school. We join First Nations children in asking why Canada has not taken the necessary measures to address the inequities in education and other services on reserves—such as child welfare—given that there are no barriers to the full and proper implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in this very wealthy country.

The children and youth have dedicated this report to Shannen Koostachin of Attawapiskat First Nation, founder of the Shannen's Dream campaign for "safe and comfy schools and culturally-based and equitable education" for First Nations

children and youth living on reserves in Canada. Shannen was a First Nations youth leader who went to school in run down portables sitting next to a site contaminated by a spill of over 50,000 litres of diesel fuel. She knew that the Canadian Government provided First Nations children about \$2,000 to \$3,000 less per student, per year, than the provinces and territories provided to non-First Nations children for education. This shortfall means fewer teachers, learning resources and education and employment opportunities are available for First Nations children. Three Ministers of Indian Affairs (representing Canada) promised the children of Attawapiskat a new school but failed to deliver. Shannen saw students in her community give up hope and drop out of school by grade five because their learning conditions were so bad. The portables were so run down that the heat often turned off in the classrooms, driving the temperatures so low that the children had to wear mitts just to hold a pencil.

Shannen believed that, "school was a time for dreams and every kid deserves this", so she reached out to non-Aboriginal children across Canada to write to the Canadian Government to demand proper schools and equitable education on reserves. Thousands of students answered her call. Shannen believed Canada had an obligation to provide equitable education to First Nations children and that is why she and three other First Nations youth wrote a letter, addressed to the Department of Canadian Heritage, to be forwarded to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC or the Committee) in 2008 saying that she, and other First Nations children, would participate in the 3rd and 4th periodic reviews. For her efforts, Shannen was nominated for the International Children's Peace Prize in 2008. Sadly, Shannen passed away in a tragic car accident in June of 2010 but her dream lives on in the campaign named in her memory—"Shannen's Dream." Shannen's Dream is a partnership between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children and caring adults to ensure the Canadian Government provides "safe and comfy schools and culturally-based and equitable education" for all First Nations children on reserves. Shannen's

Dream is now supported by over 4,500 children, adults and organizations and the numbers are growing every day.

With this document, First Nations children and youth are fulfilling Shannen's dream of submitting an alternate report to the UNCRC in hopes that the Committee will order an Article 45 review on Canada's implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child for First Nations children and youth across Canada. The Article 45 review should explore all areas of inequity in government service delivery as the problems in education are replicated in child welfare and health services on reserves.

This report is structured in four parts. The first section presents an introductory letter from First Nations students who have raised the issue of inequitable funding for First Nations education and schools on reserves in Ontario and across Canada. This section also includes the original letter written to the UNCRC in 2008 by the late Shannen Koostachin and other Attawapiskat First Nations youth who inspired the Shannen's Dream movement for safe and comfy schools and equitable education on reserves.

The second part of the report consists of thirty-eight letters written by young people voicing their concerns and support in addressing the deplorable learning environments and rights violations. The letters describe the lack of schools in some communities, the disrepair and safety issues in other schools, the exposure to cold and extreme weather conditions and the lack of basic supplies needed to ensure students receive a proper education.

The third section of the report provides thoughts, observations and comments from Cindy Blackstock, Executive Director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada and Irwin Elman, Ontario's Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth who join to support the submissions of the young people. This section provides additional information on the scale of the inequity and its impacts on First Nations children and youth on reserves.

The fourth section provides a list of recommendations based on the letters written by the children and youth. The recommendations are intended to address the young people's perceptions of where the problems lay in First Nations education.

The power of this alternate report lies in the voices of the young people themselves who are asking why the Canadian Government treats First Nations children in inequitable ways. The children wrote their letters for this report with the expectation that adults in Canada and in the international community would listen and take all measures necessary to put an end to this longstanding discrimination. Finally, the children want an Article 45 review so that the UNCRC can observe first hand the inequalities that the children describe in these letters. And, while informative, it is important to keep in mind there are many other children with many other stories of the devastating impacts rooted in government-based discrimination in education and other children's services on reserves that remain untold.

The First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada and Ontario's Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth are committed to advancing and elevating the voices of children as they identify and seek solutions to issues of importance to them. In submitting this alternate report, the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth joins with children, youth and the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, to request that a Special Rapporteur undertake an Article 45 review of the inequities faced by First Nations children in Ontario and across Canada.

Signatories,

Dream Team Members

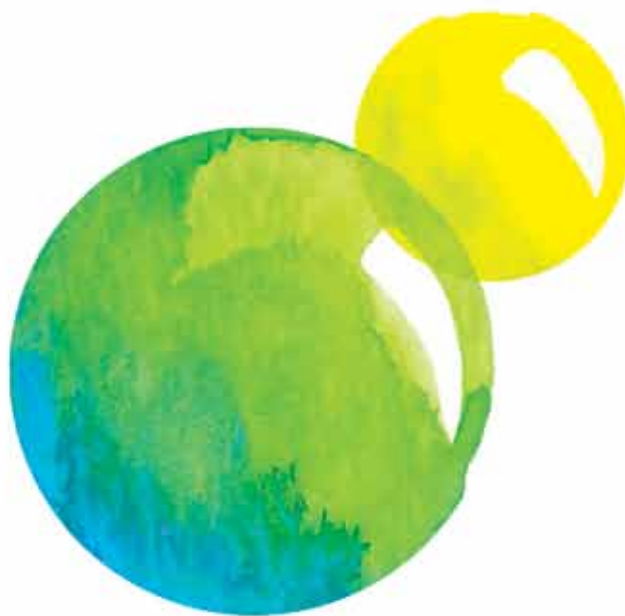
Original signatories of Shannen's Letter

Cindy Blackstock, First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada

Irwin Elman, Ontario's Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth

Section I

**We Are
First Nations
Children
and Youth**





Youth Dream Team Letter to the UNCRRC

In memory of Shannen Koostachin, aged 15, we the youth members of the Dream Team, and other First Nations Children and Youth from across Canada, submit these letters to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child seeking your help. We would like you to ask the Government of Canada why there are no schools in many of our communities and why so many of our schools are in such poor condition. We want to know why the level of funding we receive for education is less compared to communities in other parts of Ontario and Canada. We also want to know why we have to fight so hard for what our peers in other parts of Canada are able to take for granted.

In 2008, four students from Attawapiskat First Nation in northern Ontario, Shannen Koostachin, Chris Kataquapit, Solomon Rae and Jonah Sutherland, wrote to the Committee on behalf of all students of Attawapiskat First Nation, to let you know that many First Nations children and youth were suffering because of the poor conditions in our schools and the underfunding of education and learning support programs. These circumstances make our right to receive a proper education almost impossible in many of our communities.

Children in Attawapiskat still go to school in run down portables that are overcrowded, unheated, overrun with mice and placed only metres away from the polluted site of the original school building. The old school sat on land contaminated by the seepage of over 50,000 litres of diesel fuel. Though the fuel leak was known to the Government for years, no action was taken to safeguard the health of the children and youth in the community. Students and teachers alike became ill as a result of the leaking fuel while the Government denied there was any problem. Eventually, the school was closed and replaced with portables that were supposed to be a temporary solution.

Since 2000, three separate Ministers of Indian and Northern Affairs, Robert Nault, Andy Scott and Chuck Strahl, have visited Attawapiskat and promised that a new school would be built. However, the portables remain and their condition continues to deteriorate while the children wait. We know that there are 50 First Nations communities that need schools and that some First Nations schools are infested with snakes, mice and contaminated with black mould. How are we supposed to learn in these conditions? The young people of Attawapiskat are not asking for special favours or to be treated differently from other young people in Canada. They are simply asking for the same level of resources provided to students living off reserve and for the Government to keep its promises and safeguard their rights. That is the simple message behind Shannen's Dream, the letter writing campaign and the efforts of students across the country that form the basis of this alternate report to the Committee. Shannen just wanted the Government to keep its word to First Nations children and youth and to remember that receiving an education is a right for all children and youth in Canada. She wanted Government leaders to understand that it is hard for children to learn when they are in classrooms that are cold, unhealthy, poorly resourced, unsafe, and in need of repair—a common experience for First Nations young people on reserves across Canada. Can any adult imagine having to go to work in such conditions day after day, year after year?

Shannen wanted you to know that First Nations children across Canada have dreams of becoming doctors, teachers, grass dancers, engineers, cooks, producers and other things. We want to be successful people who help make our communities stronger. She also wanted to let you know that the Government of Canada provides less funding for elementary and secondary schools on reserve than for schools off reserve. This makes achieving our dreams very difficult. Shannen was going to send the Committee a full report on what this difference in funding means for First Nations students but, sadly, she passed away last spring in a car accident.

Many of us are giving up hope because we can't get a proper education. As many as three out of four First Nations youth will drop out of high school because they have lost hope. "School is a time for dreams", Shannen said, "every kid deserves this." There are many children who, like us, continue to struggle to make sure Shannen's dream of "safe and comfy schools" that reflect the culture of our peoples and provide the same level of education for First Nations students as non-First Nations students is realized.

We continue to work with people and organizations across the country to keep Shannen's dream and memory alive. The Shannen's Dream campaign is about young people and adults making sure that the Government of Canada provides the level of funding necessary on reserves so that First Nations youth can learn their languages and cultures in proper schools (not in polluted buildings, tents or mouldy, mice infested and unsafe portables). The attached letters from First Nations students of all ages tell our story and explain to the Committee why education is so important to us. We all believe that you can make a difference and we ask for your help.

With the help of adult allies and supporters we have been told that you can order a review under Article 45 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. We are hopeful that when this review is undertaken, a Special Rapporteur will come to Attawapiskat and other First Nations communities in Canada and see the substandard conditions of our schools and the education we receive. We know the law says that the same standards of education must apply to both on-reserve and off-reserve schools. We also know that no off-reserve community would tolerate the shameful conditions under which we receive our education. We want you to ask the Government

of Canada why the schools and standards pertaining to education for First Nations children are so markedly different from what is provided to students off-reserve.

In Shannen's, Chris's, Solomon's and Jonah's original letter to the Committee in 2008 (which follows this letter) they shared the view of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation that declared there are two standards of education in Canada and that a system of "educational apartheid" exists for First Nations children. We want to know why.

As children and youth, we continue to write letters to the Government but nothing changes. The discrimination and denial of our rights continues. We need your help. Please read our letters. Please come to see us! Please help! Please stand for Shannen who never saw the promised school built in her community. It is in her memory that we are keeping her dream alive and writing to share the message she wanted you to hear. Please join with us and ask the Government of Canada to meet its obligations to ensure First Nations children and youth have access to the same education opportunities as all young people in Canada. It is our right.

Signatories,

Dream Team Members

River Tenasco

Daisey Brascoupe

Shawnesia Ottawa

Chelsea Edwards

Shauna Jerome

***First Nations children and youth
across Canada***



ATTAWAPISKAT FIRST NATION EDUCATION AUTHORITY

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July 11, 2008

Marie-Claude Côté-Villeneuve

Human Rights Program

Department of Canadian Heritage

Destination code: 15-11-C

Gatineau, QC K1A 0M5

FAX: 819-994-5252

E-mail: marie-claude_cote@pch.gc.ca

RE: Attawapiskat Children Seek Input into UN
Report on the Rights of the Child

Dear Marie-Claude Côté-Villeneuve:

We are 13-year-old children from the Attawapiskat Cree First Nation. We live on the isolated, sub-Arctic lands of the James Bay coast in Ontario. Our first language is Cree. The nearest road to our community is 400 kms away. We are writing to request that the failure of the federal government to follow up on its repeated promises to the children of Attawapiskat to replace a school contaminated by a diesel leak with a safe school that supports learning be included in Canada's report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) regarding Canada's implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

We intend to follow up this letter with a Shadow Report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child that will outline the systemic discrimination and negligence that we have suffered at the hands of the Federal government, through the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (INAC). We will be working on this report with our partners in the provincial and national education and child rights fields.

These allies include but are not limited to: the Attawapiskat Education Authority, the Mushkegowuk Tribal Council, the Ontario Public School Boards Association, (members of the) Ontario Catholic School Board Association, Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association (OECTA), Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF), Canadian Teachers Federation (CTF), various NGOs, plus students, principals and teachers from schools across Canada who have joined the fight to ensure that children in our community should have comparable rights to proper schooling and funding as are guaranteed by Canadian and provincial/territorial laws to Non-Native children and ensured under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

These organizations fully understand the legal responsibilities that exist for ensuring that governments provide adequate education resources in Canada. They will work with us to identify how we, as First Nation children, have been denied the basic rights taken for granted by other students in Canada. As we are within the jurisdiction of Ontario, we will make direct comparisons to the rights enjoyed by students under provincial school board authorities.

Our shadow report will look at the obligations of Canada under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and contrast these commitments with the massive and unnecessary inequities that are faced by Aboriginal children born on reserves due to federal government policies and decisions.

This report will come at a later date. For now, we felt it was important to send this introductory letter to let you know who we are and why we have made appeal to you.

We are known in Canada as “the Forgotten Children of Attawapiskat.” We are a generation of children that have never seen a real school. For nearly 30 years the school grounds and building of J.R. Nakogee Grade School has been poisoned by the largest diesel contamination leak in Ontario. This leak was caused when the Federal government was operating our school. By the time the leak was discovered, nearly 50,000 litres of diesel contamination had seeped into the earth under the school building and playground.

Between 1979 and 1990, the leak continued as the federal government did nothing to stop it. Children were getting sick. Teachers suffered headaches and some quit midway through the year. Numerous attempts were made to get INAC to take action. No money was put aside to clean up the school even though children as young as five were breathing carcinogen-laden benzene fumes on a daily basis.

We were very young then and didn’t understand what was happening to us. Now we know better. We know that, in the Province of Ontario, there are very clear laws and regulations protecting students from health threats. Provincial school authorities have legal obligations to identify health risks and set timelines and action plans to address potential threats to health that might be raised in the context of a school environment.

And yet, none of those protections were applied to our school population. The federal government knew of the health threats we faced and yet, children and teachers were left in this toxic environment despite numerous requests from the community for help. Our health was put at risk because the policy of the federal government has been to spend as little money as possible on First Nation education issues.

In the year 2000, our frustrated parents pulled their children out of the school. We were put up in makeshift portables. At the time, our parents believed that this massive contamination, which had been caused under the watch of the federal government, would be cleaned up and we would be given a new school.

In 2000, Indian Affairs Minister Robert Nault promised the community that a new and safe school would be built. Nothing was done. This promise was repeated in 2005 by Indian Affairs Minister Andy Scott and in 2007 by the staff of Minister Jim Prentice.

Over that period of time, our elders provided INAC with every study they requested. Our Education Authority prepared financial plans, school plans and enrollment plans. Our elders worked in good faith, believing that the federal government would ensure that we were finally given what every other child in Ontario takes for granted.... a proper school. And yet, despite these years of promises and negotiations from the Federal government, nothing was done.

In the year 2001 the Education Authority asked that a complete comprehensive assessment of their school programs be carried out. A group of external educational experts was contracted to do the work. Their report (a copy of which was provided to Indian Affairs) concluded:

“The temporary accommodations are acceptable as buildings, but totally unacceptable in terms of providing a broad inquiry-based, student-centered, integrated and seamless program...These teaching/ learning compromises are a great disservice to the students and teachers, and totally unacceptable in today’s educational environment.”

In the meantime we grew up in makeshift portable classrooms where the fire doors jammed shut in the winter (because of shifting ground) and the windows remained jammed open. On January mornings we sat in classrooms with winter coats on to keep out the cold. We went through our grades with teachers who were frustrated by the lack of resources available to them. We grew up without knowing what it was like to have a real library, a proper gym, adequate computer labs or a common area so we could develop a proper school community.

The federal government routinely denied adequate funding to our students who had special needs despite the fact that, non-Native children are guaranteed by law adequate support resources.

And yet we put up with all of this because we believed that the government would keep its word to our community. We believed that a new school would one day be built.

In December 2007, the new Minister of Indian Affairs Chuck Strahl broke our hearts when he cancelled plans for our school. He simply walked away on years of negotiations. Written commitments that had been made by the federal government just a few months previous were ignored.¹ The government announced that it no longer had any plans to build a school in Attawapiskat and would not provide any timelines for when such a school would be built.

When we learned that the government had completely dropped our community from its list of priorities, we made the decision to continue to fight for a school. We decided to reach out to non-Native schools across Canada and ask them to help us pressure the government. We began a grassroots campaign with Youtube, Facebook and letter-writing. Over 100 schools have joined this campaign. Over 65,000 visitors have watched our Youtube videos. We have received the support of every major educational organization in Ontario and many others across Canada. We are thrilled by the support we have received from so many non-Native and Native students who are working with us to try and get a school built.

Our fight has gathered national attention. The *Toronto Star* wrote an editorial (March 11, 2008) condemning the government's disinterest in our situation.

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...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.

This past spring, our grade 8 class took the unprecedented step to go to Ottawa to personally plead with the Minister Chuck Strahl to live up to his obligation to build us a school. He told us he had no money. He told us he had other priorities. This did not make much sense as Canada has been running a 20 billion dollar surplus budget. We politely, but firmly told him that we didn't believe him. We didn't believe that a country as rich as Canada couldn't afford to build a school for children who had gone 8 years on a poisoned school ground.

We learned afterwards that during those 8 years, nearly \$579 million had been taken out of the federal government's Capital Infrastructure Fund for building schools in First Nations and spent on other items—including lawyer's fees and management fees.²

Imagine all the schools that could have been built with this money! No non-Native community would ever have to worry that school projects might be cancelled because money was being moved to other areas. Policies that threaten one segment of the population in such an arbitrary manner are, by its very nature, discriminatory and unjustifiable. As we will show in our shadow report, every non-Native child is guaranteed transparent rights regarding classroom size, teacher-to-student ratios, capital project envelopes and special education funding. And yet our community has to live at the whims of the Department of Indian Affairs.

The inequity is made worse by the fact that the Federal government mandates our local education authority to meet the requirements of the provincial education curriculum, without making

any commitments to provide comparable funding as is provided to provincially-funded schools. This blatant discrimination is not a function of the Indian Act. This is not something written into the treaty. This is simply an arbitrary policy of Indian Affairs that leaves children like us without adequate resources or protection.

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) has been one of the educational organizations that have been very vocal in denouncing the discrimination we are facing in Attawapiskat. In an April 2008 newsletter that went to every public high school teacher in Ontario, they asked teachers to join our campaign for a school in Attawapiskat. The title of the article was, *“Education Is A Right Not A Privilege Unless You Are A First Nation Child.”* They went on to say that “two standards of education exist in Canada and that a situation of Educational apartheid exists in Canada.”

As you well know, the word “apartheid” describes deliberate and systemic discrimination based on race. The term “educational apartheid” was used in an editorial by the *Timmins Daily Press* (Editorial, January 26, 2008) to describe our situation:

“Apartheid is not a word to use lightly so when it’s used in Canada, it’s going to raise a few eyebrows and question how such a word with negative connotations could be used in a country that prides itself on being a multicultural network.

“...For more than eight years, students in the Northern community of Attawapiskat have been attending classes in portables since the J.R. Nakogee School was closed due to diesel fumes rising up from the ground the school was built on, causing sickness among the students.

“Year after year since the closure, the federal government has failed to provide the funding to build a new school leaving hundreds of students attending cold, drafty and deteriorating portables.... Canadians should hang their heads in shame for allowing such social situations on our First Nations to continue to go unanswered.

The students in Attawapiskat deserve better. They remain separate, remain unequal.

“It’s time to break down the walls of educational apartheid and treat the students as equals.”

This systemic discrimination is a breach of the key clauses of the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child which Canada is a signatory to. This discrimination is made clear when we look at the massive discrepancies between the funding envelopes for non-Native students and reserve-based students. Further, the discrimination is institutionalized by the refusal of the federal government to set any clear or transparent goals and corresponding financial obligations to address the needs of isolated First Nation communities.

As we shall show in our shadow report, there are anywhere from 40 to 80 Aboriginal communities suffering from substandard school facilities, condemned school facilities or no school facilities. And yet the federal government will not come forward with a clear and transparent plan for addressing this terrible backlog.

The Ontario Public School Boards Association (with the backing of their 72 member School Boards) has challenged Minister Strahl on this point. In an April 28, 2008 press release, Trustee Grace Fox is quoted as saying, “All children have the right to quality education. The children of Attawapiskat have endured substandard conditions for too many years. It is high time for them to be a priority for this federal government and get the school they so desperately need.”

In fact, the OPSBA goes further in calling on the federal government to provide a public action plan to address the shameful backlog in education projects on First Nation territories all across Canada.

As will be shown in our follow-up shadow report, the failure of the federal government to provide a coherent plan and timeline for addressing issues like the Attawapiskat school crisis speaks to the failure of Canada to meet some of the most basic requirements under the UN Convention of the Child.

We will show how we have been routinely discriminated against in terms of funding for special education school funding formulas.

We will provide evidence of the appalling negligence of INAC regarding the diesel contamination of our school and compare how similar situations would have been handled in non-reserve schools.

We will provide the United Nations committee a picture of the inadequate resources provided to our Aboriginal students for computer training, trades and other opportunities. We will document the hopelessness that creeps into our children causing them to begin dropping out of school in Grade 5.

We will compare the refusal of INAC to set targets and timetables for addressing the backlog of school needs with the legal obligations of regional school boards and provincial education ministries to develop transparent goals for non-Native students.

But even more than a simple report, we look forward to meeting with the members of the committee. We want the committee to know how passionate we are to have a proper school built in our community. We simply refuse to give up on our younger brothers and sisters who should not go through what we have gone through.

Just this past spring, the federal government stood in the House of Commons to deliver a historic apology to the previous generation of First Nation children who had been mistreated and forced to attend the government's residential school systems. This was a historic moment for our people. We were pleased that the government had finally recognized the damage its policies did to generations of First Nation children.

And yet we are part of a new generation that is suffering from deliberate policies that limit our educational hopes and opportunities. We will note that there are other First Nations children across Canada who, like us, are getting far less educational support than other children. The apology from Canada needs to be acted upon.

We want the government to take responsibility for what is happening to the present generation of children.

When we met Minister Chuck Strahl in May 2008, we asked him to come to our community and walk a mile in our moccasins so he could understand the situation we are living in. He refused.

We would like to invite the UN members of the committee to visit Attawapiskat. We believe that when they see the situation faced by the children on the James Bay Coast they won't be able to turn away from us and say, as Mr. Strahl said, that they have other "priorities."

In conclusion, we are excited about participating in the UN's review of Canada's international obligations under the rights of the child.

Meegwetch,

Shannen Koostachin

Chris Kataquapit

Solomon Rae

Jonah Sutherland (on behalf of the students of Attawapiskat First Nation)

cc.

Grand Chief Phil Fontaine, Assembly of First Nations
Grand Chief Stan Beardy, Nishnabi Aski Nations
Grand Chief Stan Louttit, Mushkegowuk Tribal Council
Chief Theresa Hall, Attawapiskat First Nation
Charlie Angus, MP (Timmins-James Bay)
Ontario Public School Boards Association
Ontario Catholic School Boards Association
Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association
Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation
Canadian Teachers Federation

[1] July 30, 2007 letter from Bob Howsam, Director of Ontario region of INAC to Attawapiskat Education Authority "This acceptance will allow the new elementary school project in Attawapiskat to move forward to the next stage of development."

[2] "\$579 Million Shuffled From Native Projects", *Toronto Star*, June 9, 2008

Section II

Letters from Children and Youth About How the Inequity in Education Affects Us



Why is education important?

That shouldn't even be asked as a question. Education is very important for people of all religions/cultures. Education for aboriginal people should be treated fairly, just as it would be for any other race. It's not as if we take learning any different than any other race. I'm sure we all take it the same way.

The underfunding of first nations education is upsetting. I think that we should be getting treated fairly when it comes to education. We get no funding for learning our language, barely any for physical education, or none for our libraries. Our school compared to other schools is really underfunded. Our language is very important to us. And if we receive no funding for learning our language, then how will we learn it? We won't be able to.

Most of us love to play gym. Love to play hockey, volleyball, football, soccer, etc. Once again, we don't get funding for these types of things. So, those of us with a dream for becoming some day a hockey player,

a volleyball player, or a soccer player, won't be able to because we never got the chance to learn it while in school.

Our library...not much in it. No one really signs out books other than elementary. And even then, they sign out books like "Dear Dumb Diary." For high school students, there isn't much to choose from. If we received funding for our library, we'd be able to purchase more books, which could potentially interest young people. We could purchase books about becoming a nurse, a doctor, a dentist, etc. more for high school students who are interested in reading about future career options.

We don't even get funding for our computers, we find funding from somewhere else which is probably a struggle for the teachers. Each year it seems as though we get less and less funding. Eventually, if they continue decreasing our funding rate, we will have no more funding which is probably what they want. They want to cut our funding for college, which would make it extremely difficult for a first nation's student to continue to go to college.

If they continue to provide funding for first nation's education, it will make many happy. The funding provides us to be able to complete high school and to go to college, and fulfill our future career plans. If you ask anybody, funding is very important to us. If you were to take that all away from us, I guarantee you'd see a drop in first nation students finishing high school, or even attending college. I'm not speaking for every single student but I do speak for a few. Personally, if funding was cut, I'd have a really hard time but I would try. I'd need a lot of support from my family to help me pay rent every month, and to help me pay for school books and groceries & everything a student needs. I'd need to get a job in order to "survive" on my own.

All in all, funding plays a major role in first nation's education. If anyone were to take it away from us, we'd have a hard time. Which is why they should leave it as is: because we are getting by. But I also think that they should provide more funding for our language, physical education and our libraries.

—Brianna



— *Brianna*

It's not fair because they don't have a gym, they don't have books or clean air. If we don't help them they could get sick because of the cold air and the oil from the ground. Our school is really lucky to have doors that close and books to read. They don't have an education but you have very good education, if you help them that would be a very big favour.

P.S. My name is Marshall

Thank you and have a great day.

I am here today writing about different things that get to me, like being in an environment where there are very few options in life and the education not the greatest. Like we used to be able to have hot lunches and now there is no money in the budget, we used to be able to have good healthy lunches instead of bring paper bag lunches to school and sometimes parents can't afford to buy lunches to supply for a family of five. We would be able to go visit different college's and look elsewhere out of the community, but now we have a certain amount of money and a certain amount for the budget, we can't even see elsewhere anymore and explore and see different challenges in life to go through.

Learning about our culture and keeping our language is very important to me because a lot of the younger teenagers these days are dropping out on it and losing their culture because we don't have enough money to fund or hire teachers to learn the language before we start losing it , our community is a very nice clean place and it would be very nice to be able to communicate with each other in our native language. When I am older I would like my children to pick up on the culture and language and learn it because it is a gift to have.

—*Jenna*

I don't think that it's fair that we have an everyday lunch and the school in Attawapiskat has mice eating their lunches and snacks. They also don't have any heater in their school and I don't find that right because they were freezing during winter. They also don't have any school supplies so they can't write any of their work. They didn't have any books so they probably didn't know how to read books that well. They also didn't have that much education so the children that lived in Attawapiskat wouldn't have all the education that they need for a job.

I also don't think that it is fair that Shannon and Serena Koostachin had to move far away from their home Attawapiskat just to get educated and to go to a real school that has everything that they need. Meegwetch, Shawna

Cree is Fun

My name is Laynee

I think Cree is an important language. I learn Cree at home and in school. My parents can speak Cree. Learning to speak Cree at school is important to me.



**Learning to
speak cree
at school is
important to me**



— *Layne*

I'm writing this letter to you as a young native man with something to say about my education. I have attended kindergarten, elementary, and high school on reserve and I am aware of the differences between the education that I have received and the education that non-aboriginal, off-reserve students have received. The lack of funding is a concern, the lack of resources is a concern, but the lack of cultural content

in our school is the biggest concern for me. If we had more funding, there would be more possibilities to include cultural activities. If we had a better sense of culture, we would be more confident, which would lead to success in life. I have developed a formula for what I am talking about. This is what my formula looks like: \$ = culture = confidence = success. If we get the funding, we get more cultural opportunities and if we get more cultural opportunities, we get more confidence, self-esteem, and a better understanding of who we are which equals success in life. I've been in Algonquin immersion for the afternoons every day at school, earnestly trying

to learn my language and culture and then, there was suddenly nothing. There was no more option for me to take classes that offered me teachings of my culture and language because the school didn't have the money to pay for another teacher. I would like to see this change. I would like to see native aboriginal students treated and funded the same as any other non-aboriginal students because we are all students, we are all human, we are all equal and should be treated as such.

—Wesley



— *Wesley*

Savanna

It is not fair that Attenapiskat does not have snacks, Books, Laptops, desks, pencils, pens, washrooms, and money and lots of other people do. Like you not even have enough money to afford fix your school boots and get washrooms. Not even to get lots of cool stuff in your school. I must suck that some students had to change schools because of their school being closed and lots of other stuff. And lots of other schools to do. People should have a nice school that's not fall apart. And that has lots of stuff and a court and gym, and lots of other cool stuff. That is so sad that they and lot of other people had to move away from their friends and families and homes. I am so sorry that people in that school had to go to that school for eight years with no heat, snacks, desks and other stuff that we have. I hope they all get a new and better school now and that they are all safe from that one school. I am so sorry.

Savanna

Cree is Cool
Hi! My name is Adrian
Cree is important. All
people should learn
about Cree. In school, I go
to Cree class. We learn Cree
words and Cree songs.
I can count up to ten
in Cree and that is nice
It makes me feel smart.

Shannen's Dream

February 7/2011

To whom it may concern;

I feel that we are treated unequal to other people, and school because of treaties and other rights because the government pays for this stuff and are in so much in debt. Because we don't pay for this our selves we don't get the same thing's as others. I feel that we should get all the same thing. We are people too, and have the same rights as others.

Our schools are so run down that they are hardly functionable. They close at least 2 to 4 times a month! Most parents don't even want to send their kids to school here anymore. On a good year our school has 300 students. And some year we can't even get Cree teacher, which makes us unable to even learn that! And Cree is a dying language. It's sad to know that it may not be here in 50-100 year the way its going.

Saddly I feel like half of our kids will drop out in high school because of lack of education. And the feeling that they cannot do it, or that it's too hard. Most Native children struggle throughout high school. Some might even fail a grade because of this and might not have the go for the year. Do to the government pays for 3 years. To prevent this I feel we need the same things as city schools. And that my dear friend is unfair.



**We are
people too
and have the
same rights
as others**

— *Justice*

Angelique

I think it not fair for the kids. I think you need to get education. I think they should get a new school and its not fun when you are crowded in the classroom and its not fair that mice eat the snacks and Its not fun when cold winds are in the school, its not fun it all!

I wish you could get a better place to stay in that is warm, full of snacks and no mice, and its not breaking apart. I think you should get a place that is the best place to have a fun place.

- The kids have to be warm and
- you too. They need education to live. They need education. I can help too. They would like to have a better classroom. I would want them to have a good school not broken down, because they should be in the best school ever. I would not like it if I was in that school. I would help those students get a better school. thank you

Cree is Excellent
My name is Alexander

I think Cree language is a
fun language to learn. It is fun
because people can read it and we can
speak it too. In Cree class, we learn
how to speak the language. We also
learn the Cree culture. Cree is
an important language to know.

My name is River.

I'm writing this letter in regards to the lack of cultural content in my school and the Things we need in which to change that.

I'm aware that I have a right to education within my own community and culture. However, this is not happening. The School however does not have the budget to extend a cultural program into the high school. I have attended a half day Algonquin immersion through elementary dedicating a lot and now feel ripped off. Just as I felt I was achieving, everything stopped? There are no more language and cultural inclusion.

Some of the things I feel should be addressed are number one: Why do I need to have learned somebody else's language and not my own in order to receive my diploma while attending a native school???

Why am I expected to meet the province's expectations for high school when we're not treated like other schools in the province???

Why aren't we learning OUR LANGUAGE???

In order to be successful in life, we have to be proud of who we are. In order to be proud of who we are, we have to know and understand who we are. We need more opportunities and resources to do so.

—*River*



**Why am I
expected to
meet the
province's
expectations
for high school**

**when
we're not
treated like
other schools
in the
province?**



Robbie

I think that they could get a big new school. Lots of education, a free lunch like we do and doors that close right and no holes for mice to get in. And a way bigger classrooms, a gym to learn how to play dodgeball, and all different kinds of games. And a big playground so the students of that school could have fun. And money for their school so they could go on field trips, bake sales, bbqs and pizza, hotdogs, and subway lunches water fountain better washrooms like an washrooms physical education a basketball. More school supplies like lots of erasers, paper, pencils, rulers, tape, and staples and stuff like laptops, and computers.

Cree is Good
My name is Rayden

It is good to learn Cree I think it's wonderful because we can learn to speak Cree. We can speak Cree with our masom and Kobko (grand father and grand mother) They will be very happy because you know how to speak Cree. Cree is an awesome language to know!

I feel it is very unfair that the government is trying to cut our post secondary education funding, when they hardly give us any money in the first place. The government gives way more money to the provincial schools than the schools on the reserve. It is unfair among the other issues the government is causing, this is the worst issue. The schools on the reserve, including mine, are missing out on a lot of opportunities, because we don't have the money. Other schools are getting lots of money and opportunities to go places.

A long time ago, the western natives made a treaty with the Europeans that came to Canada, that the natives would have free education, tax free, and free health care. The government is trying to rip us off: they aren't living up to the bargain, they are being selfish.

My school could use new supplies, not just mine probably a lot of other schools on reserves as well. The books are old and all ripped up. It isn't fun to learn when the books are like that. We could also use new computers. The gym equipment is getting old and starting to fall apart.

This is how I feel about this issue.

—*Nigig*



**The books are
old and all
ripped up. It isn't
fun to learn
when the books
are like that.**

— *Nigig*

preston

We have a nice school, free hot lunch and they have no school supplies, they have bad and small classrooms they have no snacks. If I had to go to school there I would try to bring snacks for everyone and clean drinks and wish for a bigger better school for everyone. If I can make a change I would give them better supplies, more teachers and lots of space. If I was a worker building their school I would give them the biggest, most awesome school they would ever wish for, with the biggest gym they would ever think of. If I had to grow up in a school, without a school without education I would have to suffer and suffer until high school. I think of this letter as if it is us suffering every day getting sick and growing up in a school that is falling apart every day and night. I would try to help Attawapiskat and the family of Shannen Koostachin and for them to have better physical education for them. Thank you Shannen Koostachin for helping your friends and family.

Why Language & Culture is
Important to me
Feb 14, 2011

There are many reasons why our language and culture is important to me, and not just to me but to the whole reserve and reserves all over North America. We are losing our language and we need to do something about it now or we'll lose it and eventually it will lead to disaster and we could lose our status and our reserves can be taken over. If we keep up with the immersion program for our native languages we could stay strong as a nation and as people. We could even grow stronger if we start more immersion programs and we could spread them out all over the country.

We have lots of traditions, one big one is the Pow-wow. Pow-wows are a big tradition we do every year. These Pow-wows are meant for fun, dancing, and to be together as a family and to ensure peace throughout all of us. There are Pow-wows throughout the country all year long and we always have them every year. We are blessed to be living on this earth and we gladly celebrate it by attending these Pow-wows every time we can. It's also good entertainment. It has food, dancing, and random jokes from our MC hosts throughout the two days of the Pow-wow. It's a good experience and if you haven't went to one I advise you to go to one.

Our language has a great effect on us. It has an effect on our Spirit and which makes us proud people and a proud nation. We can have our own language and eventually we will speak it fluently. We will continue our traditions and celebrate life as it goes by every day. We are unique and we are proud of who we are. We are Natives and we plan to stay like that, forever.

—*Katina*



— *Miguwhn*

You want to know what I think? How about how I feel? Well, this is what I got to say.

I think it's unfair that non-native schools get more stuff than native schools. Why? What's the difference? They're both schools teaching students the same subjects. Just in native schools, the students learn to speak their language and the culture: it's still a school. Yet, non-native schools get more. Native schools have teachers who get paid less than a teacher in a non-native school. That's so unfair! Why?! Is it because we're natives with a school

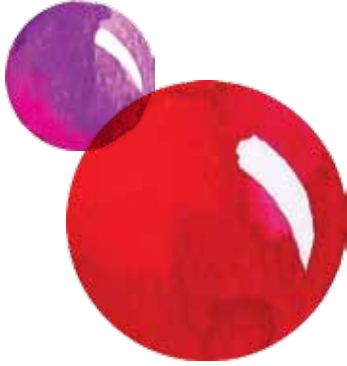
of our own on OUR reserve, a school for OUR people to learn about OUR history? That's just sick, why do that? Just because we're natives, doesn't mean we don't have any feeling. It gets me angry that our school gets less. Why do non-native schools get spoiled? Answer that!

—*Miguwhn*

Nolan

I think it's not fair that we have a playground, soup and snacks everyday and the school in Attawapiskat they don't have the stuff that we have here

So lets try and make it fair, it must suck having mice eating their food mostly everyday or when the doors don't shut properly and some of the windows boarded up on every portable because the windows are broken and its cold inside because the doors and the windows. Plus they don't have heaters.



— *Nolan C.*

Learning Cree

My name is Owen

I think learning about my culture is important. My masom (grandfather) teaches me about sundances and talking cree.

I've been to round dances, feasts and pow-wows. They are fun to go to.

I feel good because I see my family and elders. In school, we learn these things cree class. We also learn cree in a grade two class. my culture is important to me.

Why does the government always have to treat us different? If anything, they should be thanking our people and worshipping us for what we've done for them.

The underfunding is not fair, if everywhere else is getting the funding they need. Sure, we might not have the best education in the world, but we do try hard to pass and have a good education.

The government made a treaty with us and they're not sticking to it. Why are they doing that? Because they're all selfish people? They have to learn to stick to what they bargained for, the native peoples let them live on their land, do what they wanted to do, and live on. But now, they're so 'powerful' and they think they can back out on what they settled for. That's not right. They told us we would pay no taxes, we'd get free health care, we'd get free schooling. Now we're starting to pay for all that. Sure it was a long time ago we made that treaty, but it is still there! We even have the Wampum belts to prove it. They apologized to us once for doing wrong, and they're putting themselves in the same position to come right back and apologize to us again.

—*Jordon*

Hi my name is Nolan,

Just thinking about having a school with a breeze coming in, it's always cold inside and it's crowded with kids, mice eating your snacks, and the portables shifting around, they don't have a play ground nor don't have a hot lunch and sand wiches like what our school has and a play ground with hockey nets and basket ball nets and a nice big gym like what we have, pencil and erasers and lined paper and pens and they don't have the things that we have.

And they have been fighting for 8 years and nothing happened they have been writing letters to you and nothing happened and that's unfair that they don't get a real school like what you guys got when you were kids and there miserable with out a good school with school supplies and sports. They don't have any of that and it must be cold out side and inside.

So you should atleast give them one thing that they've been wanted for 13 to 8 year and that's way to long and that will make Attawapiskat happy and the younger ones will have a better future so think real hard about it and think about the condition's that there portables are in and it don't think you would like mice in your food and get thought in a school with doors that can't shut right and wood that covers the windows, and step up and be a real man.



— Nolan

Cree IS cool
my name is shakira

Cree is a good language
to speak. I can speak Cree to
my mom when I learn Cree. I learn
at my Cree class

Cree is important and cool.

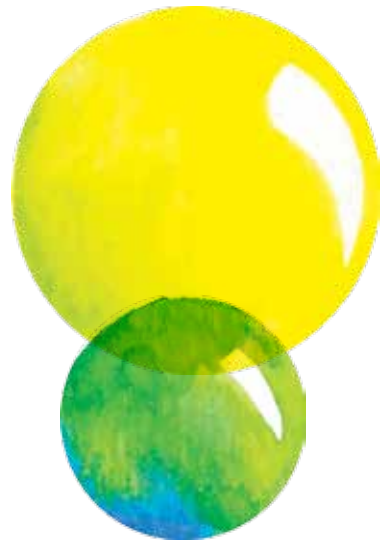
I feel angry that the government is taking money from us. It's not fair that we don't have the same amount of money like the other schools near our community. We want to learn as much as them. Why should it be different?

We have dreams and we want to realize them. Without this funding, some of us won't make it to college or university. We need an education to succeed in life.

—*Jeremy*



— *Jeremy*



**If I was
an adult,
and I was a
builder I would
build a school
for them**

— *Griffin*

(Griffin)

Here at my school we get free soup and sandwiches, a good playground, hockey nets and lots of sticks. It's not fair that they don't have computers, books, library, food that are getting eaten by mice, Washroom, maps, globes, bulletin board, no baseball teams, hockey teams, basketball teams. No cross country or track and field. No field trips. No study books. No resource books for learning math, science, spelling, social studies, E.L.A. We have a gym with baseball gloves bats and helmets. They need physical education. If I was an adult, and I was a builder I would build a school for them.

Cree IS Fun to learn

My name is Magic

When non-Aboriginal children learn Cree language they can help others who don't know Cree. Learning Cree is good for you because you can talk Cree to mosom's and kohkom's (grandfather's and grandmother's) The mosom's and kohkom's will be happy because we know how to speak Cree. Cree is a good language to speak and learn.

“Shannen’s Dream” Response

I’m very fortunate in the sense that I don’t have to deal with the hardships that are so common for students in other reserves. Even though our school’s funding is thousands less per student than what the national average is, and the teachers earn considerably less than what one would make a couple hours away; we’re still quite well off in terms of learning material and quality of education, as well as the school environment. The same can’t necessarily be said for many other reserve schools.

From what I gather, a lot of schools in reserves across Canada are horribly underfunded; most without dated and insufficient learning materials, and an environment that’s ill-fitting and distracting to learn in, (ex. over-crowded classrooms, multiple grades being taught in the same class, unheated/hazardous school buildings, etc.); all of which can be quite stressful and discouraging to a student who’s just trying to get an education. I couldn’t imagine living that way; knowing that another Canadian was getting a higher quality and much more convenient educational experience, just because he was born where he is. I would just feel so frustrated and hopeless, and I might’ve even dropped out of school like so many other native children do, and end up not becoming much of anything.

But, the government doesn’t seem to think so. The education funding has been the same for years, and the government intends to take a large portion of what very little there is, away. That would likely be a devastating blow to a lot of native communities across Canada.

—Alex

What kind of first world country allows such a huge gap between the national average and a visible minority to go broadly disregarded for so long? You would think it would make more sense (financially speaking at the very least), to have the aboriginal communities across Canada capable of supporting themselves with the education they received from within their own communities, instead of having to rely so much on the government. It might cut down on the (much) higher than national average suicide, drug abuse, and illicit act rates, since they’d have something to live for; and because they earn money from a job they’d have, they wouldn’t have to live off of welfare, AND they would be giving back to the national community. That might dispel the stigma that Canada as a whole holds against Native people.

Dominic

My name is Dominic

We have soup and sandwiches every day.

My mom would not let me go to that

school because there are mice all over

the place and the doors would not

be able to close. There is no gym

and we have a gym why can't you

give them a nice school they would

be happy for life. When I seen a

video I felt bad for the kids because

they have no gym or a playground.

You can make a difference if you

give them a new school.

Education and our culture are important because if we can't get a proper education, proper spiritual balance and cultural guidance, we will lose what makes us native, our values that come from the culture and in general what makes us a good human.

If we lose our funding, we will slowly lose our culture. This is true because if we have no funding to maintain and keep a private school for our 'reserves', our young people have to go to the public schools with the general population. Public schools teach us nothing about preserving our culture and pushing it farther into the future, instead these schools only teach about the past and the unappealing truth about what happened to our people. The way our culture is portrayed, it seems like when the Europeans 'landed' here they colonized and spread their ways across the land, and our people just stopped excelling in our culture and literally froze in the timeline. That's why it is believed by some people that we are still living in teepees and riding horses.

That's why it is important that our funding keeps coming steadily and even more, because the more funding we have to put into our culture and an education for each individual native, the more our culture will flourish and not be forgotten. Even though it seems our language is dying out, it doesn't have to mean our culture has to go with it.

—*Garrett*

Andy

It's not fair that we get education and they don't. They need a new school with a gym, a warm school with a science lab, a computer lab, a washroom and a bigger class and school. They need free lunch. They need to learn to be smart for a job. They need books and school supplies.

A long time ago our
ancestors made a 'treaty'
with the white people that
included education.

Now, the government doesn't give the same
amount of money as the others, they give
us less. To me, I think this is Racism. It's
not fair that we get less money. So, it's about
time someone stood up and brought up the
past about the treaty. We are going to fight
for this. We need our education.

—*Christa*



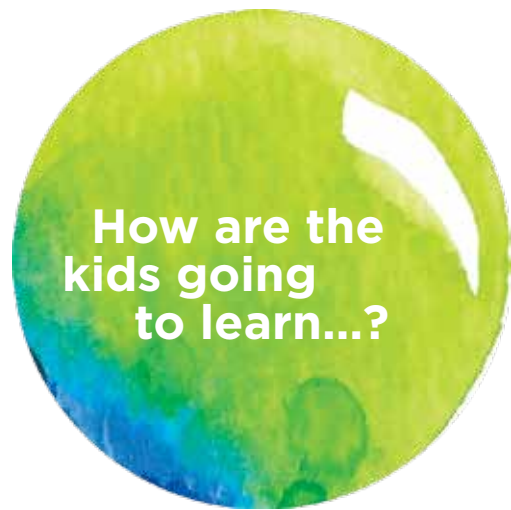
**We are going
to fight for this.
We need our
education.**

— Christa

Emily

At our school we have free lunch every day and lots of free food. We have a big class and it is heated so it's warm in the winter.

It's not fair that we get a big school and Attawapiskat has no school at all. How are the kids going to learn the are not going to get ^{any} where in life they might die at a young age. Let them have a school. Let them live their life. Build a school for them, make a big school for Attawapiskat and without nice. Help them, love them, be good to them! Don't let them down! Don't let us down! Be a better person, give them lots of money for the school.



— *Emily*

Cree Is Fun
My name is Miquiella

Cree is a fun language to learn.

Learning Cree can be neat because
you learn a different way of speaking.

You can speak to other Cree

people and elders in Cree. Everybody

should learn to speak Cree because

it is fun to learn Cree and you

can learn better.



**I feel that our
rights are as
important as any
other people.**



**It shouldn't
matter
what race
it is.**



— Diana

I feel that the government should respect our needs. Just because we have a small reserve, it doesn't mean that they can take control. This has gone on too long and we need to do something about it. Many schools struggle to keep their schools going. When I see schools in town get more amount of money than we do, I think

that it's not fair for any school to get more money than another school. Our school needs more resources, like new textbooks, new gym equipment, and new books in the library; hot lunches, new lockers, and a school van for school trips. The school I go to is crowded with many respectful and educated students. I feel that our rights are as important as any other people. It shouldn't matter what race it is. For a long time we haven't done anything about what the government is doing to us and I think that we should take control and speak up for ourselves. If the government thinks that they can do this to us and get away with it, well they're wrong because we are not going to stop until we are heard. I'm tired of the white people thinking that they're better and stronger than us.

—*Diana*

February 7th 2011

To whom it may concern;

I have a concern,
a concern that our school does not have equal resources as city schools. For grade 7 I had went to a city school & they had lots of resources. Science labs, better gym equipment, more library books & better bigger lockers. It is unfair that we do not have the resources in our school; and as children of Canada we deserve good resources too. Us children are the future, but we cannot succeed in the future if we don't have the same learning resources as other children. And because of that, some of us children have to change schools & go off reservation. Being the chief of my student council I care, I am worried for our future. If we are at lower standards than other schools I have a question. How will we be able to catch on & stay caught up for high school, college, university or all three? Please hear my concern not just for me, but for all my other great peers.

Sincerely,

Braxton



**Us children
are the future**

— *Braxton*



Section III

**The Impact
of Inequity on
First Nations
Children and Youth**



Support from the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada and the Ontario Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth

Inspired by Shannen Koostachin, the young people whose letters appear in this report are demonstrating their leadership to ensure the full enjoyment of their rights guaranteed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. These young people highlight the rights violations they are currently experiencing and the implications of those rights violations for their future development and well being. Alex describes how hard it is to learn when there are “insufficient learning materials...an environment that’s ill-fitting and distracting to learn in...over-crowded classrooms, multiple grades being taught in the same class, unheated/hazardous school buildings.” Garrett wonders if he will be able to pass along the traditions of his people as the education system is so under-funded and lacking in cultural programs. He is worried about “slowly los[ing] our culture”.

The young people’s letters describe the lack of programming and First Nations centric content in the curricula of their schools. Shania describes how a good culturally-based education could prevent many other risks that First Nations children and youth experience. Quoting Shania directly, “I think if young people had more opportunity and more access to more activities to give them something to do to pass the time, then maybe they wouldn’t be turning to drugs and alcohol.” Justice raises some issues around the relationship between inadequate

education levels and drop-out rates among First Nations youth when she says, “I feel like half our kids will drop out in high school because [of a] lack of education”. These concerns are supported by Statistics Canada data indicating that the number of First Nations children and youth dropping out of school before graduation is increasing.¹

There are many caring adults, educators and organizations in the Shannen’s Dream coalition who are pleased to support the voices of young people who continue to push for schools and equitable access to education for First Nations children and youth. This section presents the submissions of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada and the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth in Ontario regarding First Nations education.

First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada

The following sections of *Jordan & Shannen: First Nations children demand that the Canadian Government stop racially discriminating against them*—*Shadow Report: Canada 3rd and 4th Periodic Report to the UNCRC—January 28, 2011* by Cindy Blackstock, PhD of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada (FNCFCSC) are used with the consent of the FNCFCSC.

Some edited sections of the Shadow Report addressing education issues have been used to highlight the issues raised in the letters written by young people.

Introduction: Canada Fighting to Discriminate Against Vulnerable Children

Canada’s conduct toward First Nations children creates so many violations of children’s rights pursuant to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child that it is difficult to keep track of them all. The most pronounced violation challenges one of the pillars of the Convention—the obligation of State Parties to not engage in government driven racial discrimination against children.

The Shadow Report shows how inequities in elementary and secondary education on reserve undermine the potential of thousands of First Nations children trying to learn and grow up proud of their cultures and languages. Conditions in some First Nations schools rival those in the most desperate parts of the Third World. We share the story of Shannen Koostachin, a First Nations child from Attawapiskat First Nation, who led a campaign for “safe and comfy schools and culturally-based and equitable education” before dying tragically at the age of 15 in a car crash. Shannen attended school hundreds of kilometres away from her family because the school in her own community was so under-funded and sat next to a contaminated site.

The Shadow Report uses the Government of Canada’s own documents to demonstrate that it clearly knows about the discrimination and its impacts and yet chooses to undermine the rights of First Nations children. It is important to note that the forms of government-based discrimination outlined in this Shadow Report are not experienced by other children in Canada. Shannen, and thousands of children like her, would be receiving a proper education if she was not a First Nations child living on reserve.

“It is unacceptable in Canada that First Nations children cannot attend a safe and healthy school. It is unacceptable in Canada for First Nations education to languish with outdated laws, policies and funding practices that do not support basic standards. It is time for fairness and equity. Shannen Koostachin stood up for justice so the young people coming behind her might have an equal opportunity for a quality education in her community, just like young people have in communities throughout Canada. Now it is the time for fairness, justice and equity. Now is the time to realize Shannen’s dream.”

—Shawn A-in-chut Atleo National Chief, Assembly of First Nations

The Auditor General of Canada has repeatedly found that the Federal Government (as represented by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development [INAC]) provides insufficient and inequitable funding for proper schools and culturally-based education on reserves. Quoting the Auditor General of Canada (2004) directly:

“5.2 We remain concerned that a significant education gap exists between First Nations people living on reserves and the Canadian population as a whole and that the time estimated to close the gap has increased slightly, from about 27-28 years [given the Government of Canada’s current approach to addressing the inequalities].”

There is little evidence to suggest that Canada is making any significant progress in addressing the gap. Current estimates are that First Nations children on reserves receive \$2,000 to \$3,000 less per student, per year for elementary and secondary education. This shortfall means less funding for teachers, special education, teaching resources such as books, science and music equipment and other essentials that other children in Canada receive. There is no funding provided by INAC for basics such as libraries, computer software, teacher training, the preservation of endangered First Nations languages, culturally appropriate curricula and school principals.

The problem is compounded by significant shortfalls in the schools themselves (termed capital expenditures). INAC is the exclusive funder of First Nations schools on reserve and is responsible for the poor condition of many schools in First Nations communities. For example, in 2009 a Parliamentary Budget Officer (PBO) conducted a review of INAC’s funding and policies for First Nations schools across Canada. Specifically, the PBO found that INAC reports that 49 percent of schools on reserve are in poor condition, 76 percent of all First Nations schools in British Columbia and Alberta are in poor condition and 21 percent have not been inspected for their condition at all. Overall, the PBO found that all 803 schools will need replacement by 2030 but INAC does not appear to be on track to

make that happen. It appears to be significantly underestimating what it needs to provide to maintain and build proper schools. Quoting the PBO directly:

“Thus according to the PBO projections, for FY2009-10, INAC’s plans for capital expenditures are under-funded to the tune of between \$169 million in the best case, and \$189 million in the worst-case scenario annually. Thus, the annual INAC Planned Capital Expenditures according to its CFMP LTCP under estimates the likely expenditures compared to the PBO Best-Case and Worst-Case Projections (by more than 58 percent).”

These figures fail to capture the full impacts of the poor conditions of on-reserve schools and inequitable education on children. For example, a school in Manitoba had to be closed and replaced with portables because it became infested with snakes. The snakes had infested the water system so that when children turned on the taps, baby snakes would come out. Another group of children in Manitoba had to start school in 2009 in tents, as there was no school building available in their community. Some First Nations children go to school in shifts because the school buildings are so over-crowded that there is not enough room for all students to attend at the same time. It is routine, for many First Nations children to have to be sent away from their families and communities to go to school, as there is no school in their communities.

Shannen Koostachin (1995-2010) was from Attawapiskat First Nation. Her school was contaminated by approximately 50,000 litres of diesel fuel that leaked into the ground. The Government of Canada finally closed the school in 2000 after repeated complaints from students and staff that they were getting sick. The Government brought up portables as a temporary measure. Ten years later the portables are extremely run down, often losing heat in the minus 40 degree temperature. Three Ministers of INAC failed to deliver on their promises to the children of Attawapiskat to provide a new school.

Shannen Koostachin was in grade 8 at the JR Nakogee School, which was actually a series of portables, in 2008 and had never attended a proper school. She, and other youth, organized the younger children in the community to write to the Prime Minister to demand a new school. As Shannen said “school is a time for dreams and every kid deserves this.” The Government of Canada wrote back to say they could not afford a new school for the children of Attawapiskat. Upon receiving the letter saying they would not get a new school the grade 8 class decided to cancel their graduation trip and use the money to visit the Minister of INAC instead and ask for a new school. Shannen told him she did not believe him and that she would continue to fight until every child in Canada got “safe and comfy schools and culturally-based and equitable education”. She engaged non-First Nations children to write letters to the Government of Canada demanding a proper education for First Nations children and hundreds responded. In 2008, the Government of Canada said Attawapiskat would get a new school after all, but three years later, construction has not begun and many other First Nations children across Canada continue to be denied equitable education and proper schools. Shannen was nominated for the International Children’s Peace Prize given out by Kids Rights Foundation in the Netherlands in 2008.

Shannen and her family made the difficult decision to send her hundreds of miles away from her family to get a proper education off reserve. Tragically, she died in a car accident while she was away attending school. She wanted to be a lawyer to fight for the education rights of First Nations children.

Thousands of First Nations and non-First Nations children, youth and supporting adults are now working with Shannen’s family to carry her dream of “safe and comfy schools and culturally-based and equitable education” forward in a campaign called “Shannen’s Dream.”

The Government of Canada recently announced yet another study on First Nations Education. Meanwhile, the children wait to be treated equitably and as Shannen noted “they are losing hope by grade 5 and dropping out.”

➔ Conclusion

“Canada is party to numerous international human rights conventions and takes its obligations under these and other international instruments seriously. The treaties binding on Canada as a state party include: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, these treaties are not directly enforceable in Canadian law.”

—Submission by Canada to the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal (May 21, 2010).

Canada’s position that the UNCRC is not directly enforceable under Canadian law raises questions as to why Canada would not want the UNCRC to guide its duties to children. The UNCRC and the UNCRC General Comment 11 make it clear that State Parties have a duty to ensure the non-discrimination of children particularly within government laws, policies and practices. Non-discrimination is a fundamental principle woven through all sections of the UNCRC and yet, as demonstrated in this report, Canada is taking aggressive steps to ensure it can continue to treat First Nations children inequitably. Further, Canada endorsed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples on November 12, 2010 and one month later filed this submission quoted below with the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal in the child and family services case detailing its views on the Declaration:

“The Declaration is not a legally binding instrument. It was adopted by non-legally binding resolution of the United Nations General Assembly. As a result of this status, it does not impose any international or domestic legal obligations upon Canada. As Canada noted in its public statement of support, the Declaration does not change Canadian laws. It represents an expression of political, not legal, commitment.”

Clearly, Canada’s acceptance of the United Nations Declaration of Indigenous Peoples is bracketed by Canada’s political and legal views of the document, which fail to respect the spirit and intent of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Canada is one of the richest countries in the world with every capability of fully implementing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and as such should be held to the highest standard by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. In the concluding remarks of the 2nd periodic review of Canada, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child repeatedly directed Canada to close the gap in life chances between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children and yet little progress has been made.

It is time for the international community to join with First Nations children, families and leaders and with our many non- First Nations allies (particularly children) in Canada to demand that the Government of Canada ensure full equity and culturally based services for First Nations children on reserves immediately. Consistent with Canada’s obligations pursuant to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and UNCRC General Comment 11, eight recommendations have been respectfully made to the UNCRC in consideration of Canada’s periodic review.

Though the Shadow Report highlights eight recommendations, recommendation number five specifically reflects on education and notes the following:

“Consistent with the UNCRC paying particular attention to Articles 2, 28, 29, 30 as interpreted in UNCRC General Comment 11, Canada, in full partnership with First Nations Peoples Organizations and experts, take immediate and effective measures to allocate, and structure, sufficient financial, material and human resources to ensure the full enjoyment of education, cultural and linguistic rights for Indigenous children.”

[The full content of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada Shadow Report can be found at www.fncaringsociety.com]

The Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth – Ontario

In 1966, Indian Affairs Branch Canada funded and produced “A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada: A Report on Economic, Political, Educational Needs and Policies.”² In its report, the call for the Government of Canada to invest in on reserve resources specific to education were critical for the social and economic development of First Nations peoples. The report noted: “Inadequate aid may be worse than none at all because it will almost certainly drain off hope and courage. It is obvious that equal services of all kinds should be offered and as high a standard of schooling as for other children be given to every Indian child unless he is to be deprived of choice.” It is now 45 years later and rather than the high standard of schooling called for, First Nations children have in many cases been deprived of choice.

The education of First Nations youth and the condition of many of their schools are in a state of crisis across Canada. The issue of First Nations education has over the last few years been the source of the largest child and youth driven advocacy movement in Canada. Perhaps the most powerful voice on the status of First Nations education and schools is that of Shannen Koostachin, a 15 year-old Cree youth from Attawapiskat First Nation in Ontario. Shannen and her sister led the movement to have a permanent school built in their community. Shannen lived to see the promise that a school would be built but, sadly, she died before construction of the school began; the school has yet to be built. Her comment below is an invitation to others to try and understand the impact not having a school has on the hopes and dreams of children and young people.

“I would like to talk to you [about] what it is like to be a child who grows up never seeing a real school. I want to tell you about

the children who give up hope and started dropping out in grade 4 or 5. But I want to also tell you about the determination in our community to build a better world. School should be a time for hopes and dreams of the future. Every kid deserves this.”

—Shannen Koostachin

In the article “Still Waiting in Attawapiskat”, National Geographic asks if Indian and Northern Affairs (INAC) will fail another generation of First Nations children and youth. The question is based on the repeated failure of three different INAC Ministers to address the dire situation in this community. Shannen’s account of her discussion with the most recent INAC Minister, Chuck Strahl, about funding for a permanent school in her community is both saddening and inspiring in its attempt to answer the question.

“When we met up with him, Chuck Strahl told me he didn’t have the money to build a school. Shannen later told a gym full of high school students. I looked at the rich room he sat in with all his staff. I told him I wished that I had a classroom that was as nice as the offices he sat in every day. He told me he couldn’t stay for more of the meeting because he had other things to do. We were very upset. The elders who were with us had tears in their eyes. But when he was about to leave, I looked him straight in the eye and said Oh we’re not going to quit. We’re not going to give up.”

—Canadian National Geographic, 2010

We believe young people can change the world around them. Young people like Shannen have demonstrated their effectiveness as leaders. It is through her efforts that the importance of community schools and education were driven home. For the Advocate’s Office, this heightens the importance of strengthening young people’s voices so they may act as advocates on their own behalf for issues of significance to them.

Many on reserve communities struggle to provide basic education in buildings without heat, without proper classrooms or stable teaching staff; and as noted in the case of Attawapiskat, any real school at all. Of grave concern to our Office, is the number of young people who each Autumn pack up their belongings and leave their families and communities to fly into urban centres like Kenora, Sioux Lookout, New Liskard and Thunder Bay to attend high school. These children live with host families and often lack the support and guidance they require to adjust and adapt. The cultural overload and shift in academic expectations these young people face have significant impacts on their ability to cope. Without the support of family and community these young people are often placed at increasing risk for depression, engagement in at-risk behaviour and suicide.

In our discussions with First Nation young people, many have raised concerns about having to leave their communities to attend high school and the lack of employment opportunities in these new living environments. They are also concerned about the conditions in schools on-reserve and the limited employment opportunities resulting from their educational efforts. Finally, the lack of year-round access to their schools leaves them with few recreational alternatives during the summer and holiday periods. Consequently, many become involved in at-risk behaviours and get into difficulty with the law.

“The schools don’t work like our schools back home. It’s completely different here. They are all used to it and we’re expected to just slide in like we’re like them.”

—First Nations Youth

“There is no real reason to go anyway, there are no jobs for us and no one really cares if we are there or not. They just want us to show up, no one pays attention, and they know there is no work here for us, [they’re] just doing their jobs.”

—First Nations Youth

“It’s hard in the winter because it [is] so cold all the time. They shut it down a lot when it gets too cold. The wind blows under the doors and you’re cold all the time. You end up staying at home and not going cause you’re just going to freeze anyway.”

—First Nations Youth

➔ Conclusion

The voices of these First Nations youth are powerful and poignant and speak to the sense of hopelessness many feel about their chances of living productive lives and contributing in a positive way to their communities. They also express their deep frustration with the pace of change and of not being heard by Government, decision-makers, and significant adult figures in their lives. They openly share the truth of their lives with you and ask for your support and assistance.

We, as children’s advocates, know that when we help young people speak from their lived experience we gain greater understanding of the problems that affect their lives, the larger social context that gives rise to their concerns and the solutions that are most likely to change their circumstances.

The status of First Nations schools and education on-reserve needs our attention and immediate action. The Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth stands with First Nations young people. We support this campaign for justice and equity. We believe that given the proper resources, connection to their communities and culture, and the opportunity to voice their concerns, First Nations youth can bring about changes needed to realize Shannen’s Dream of equity in education for all of Canada’s children.

[1] Albanese, Patrizia, (2010). *Issues in Canada Child Poverty In Canada* pg.23 “According to the 2006 Census some 1,172,790 people identified themselves as Aboriginal which represents 3.8 percent of the total population in Canada—up from 3.3 percent in 2001 and 2.8 percent in 1996 (Statistics Canada, 2009)”.

[2] Cairns, H., Jamieson, S and K. Lysyk (1966). *A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada A Report on Economic, Political, Educational Needs and Policies in Two Volumes* pg. 11 and pg.13. Indian and Northern Development, Ottawa, Canada.



Section IV

Conclusions & Recommendations from First Nations Young People



Recommendations

As First Nations children and young people, we believe in the sacredness of our cultures, languages and our ways of life and we want to preserve these things for future generations of children. We also want to live as full and contributing members of Canadian society and of the world. We were brought up with the values of humility, honesty, love, respect, wisdom and bravery. We were taught that these values need to be shown in our behaviour and we expect the same from the leaders of the Canadian Government. Our voices are strong and united in our message to the UNCRC. Inspired by our friend Shannen Koostachin, we respectfully ask the Committee to hear our voices and stand with us as we demand that the Government of Canada (INAC) respects our rights and honours its obligations to First Nations children, youth and communities. We are growing up right now and we cannot wait for the Government to decide to do the right thing. We have dreams and we want to fulfill them. Below is a list of recommendations drawn from our letters that specify how you can support and help us:

- 1 Please move forward with an Article 45 review under the UNCRC and come to meet us and thousands of First Nations children like us who want to share with you how the inequitable funding for education on reserves impacts us. Visit our teachers, our schools and communities and then talk to the Government of Canada to find out why we have to endure these horrible conditions.
- 2 Make sure the Government of Canada (INAC) provides First Nations children and youth with culturally-based curriculum and equitable funding for education on reserves.
- 3 Too many of us have to leave home at a young age to attend school because there are either no schools in our communities or inadequate government funding on reserves means our community schools cannot give us the kind of education that we need. Please demand that Canada build schools in our communities so we don't have to leave our families.
- 4 Please tell the Government of Canada to provide support to us when we leave home because we are young and need someone to care for us and look out for us. Families who take us in need funds to provide proper care for us. We also need cultural supports and funding to allow us to return home from time to time to see our families when we are homesick or when we require their guidance and advice to help us cope and keep us on the right path.
- 5 Hold Canada to its commitment to the UNCRC to ensure First Nations children have the culturally-based learning materials, books, computers and other resources we need to attend, participate and succeed in school.
- 6 Please tell the Canadian Government how important it is to have adequately funded and First Nation based child welfare services for those of us who attend school but live in out-of-home care.

7

Make sure Canada implements ‘Jordan’s Principle’ across all Government services provided to First Nations children and youth. This would prevent us from receiving inequitable levels of service, experiencing excessive wait times and being denied urgent medical and other needed care simply because the provincial and federal governments can’t figure out who should pay for the service.

8

Let the Government of Canada know how important it is for them to fund recreation, sports and after school programs in our communities and the positive impact these programs can have on teaching life skills and reducing crime, peer violence and drug and substance abuse.

9

Ask the Government of Canada to honour its Treaty obligations to First Nations children so we can live on our traditional lands, celebrate our cultures and languages, have proper housing, clean drinking water, affordable nutritious food, sanitation systems and equitable access to medical, dental and mental health services.

10

Require the Canadian Government to provide funding to train teachers from the south so they are properly prepared for teaching in northern First Nations communities and have a better understanding of our history and cultural traditions when they come to work in our communities.

11

Insist that the Government of Canada allocate resources to create more employment opportunities and access to post secondary education for First Nations youth.

12

Make sure that the Government of Canada teaches non-Aboriginal children and youth about First Nations peoples, histories and contributions too so that we can grow up together respecting and honouring each other.

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school
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deserves this

— Shannen Koostachin