Shannen’s Dream: the shocking reality of Aboriginal education

By Emma Sarchese

Thirty years ago in the Attawapiskat First Nation Reserve on the James Bay Coast, diesel fuel began to leak under the foundation of the Reserve’s school. The Federal Government assured the community that this was not a health concern and never investigated the contamination. However, after reports of unexplained illnesses, an independent investigation began. In 2000, it was reported that over one-hundred-thousand litres of diesel fuel were located directly beneath the local school. The site was officially deemed toxic and the school closed.

The Federal government delivered portables as a temporary measure until a new school could be built. Today, and over ten years later, the children of Attawapiskat are still in those portables, which are located on the still contaminated grounds of the former school. What’s more, these portables are over-crowded, rodent-infested and can reach temperatures as cold as minus 20 degrees Celsius.

A student at the school, Shannen Koostachin led a group of her classmates in a campaign to demand new facilities from the Federal Government. Shannen met with Government officials, spoke at the University of Toronto and was nominated for an International Children’s Peace Prize. Over the course of eight years, three Ministers of Indian and Northern Affairs promised a new school, but none delivered, consistently citing a “lack of funding”.

In 2010 at age fifteen, Shannen tragically died in a car accident. Subsequently, the Attawapiskat community created the group “Shannen’s Dream” which continues to fight for the rights of Aboriginal children and demand a new school in their community—a school which has yet to be proposed. It’s been thirty years since the grounds were contaminated, why is this taking so long?

In a meeting of the Parliamentary Committee on the Status of Women earlier this February, MP Irene Mathyssen of the NDP posed this question to the Ministry of Indian and Northern Affairs (INAC), to which an official responded: “I am not going to answer that question, as that is not my responsibility.”

This is simply not good enough, and represents the inadequacy with which the Canadian government addresses the issue of aboriginal education. Dr. Cindy Blackstock, Executive Director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, explains that “not only are many schools in deplorable condition [but] all First Nations students get $2000 to $3000 less per year” in funding compared to other students. “There is no funding for something as basic as libraries,” says Dr. Blackstock who’s bringing books to the children at the end of March.

No funding eh? Let us reflect upon Canada’s spending in the past year. Last year the Government of Canada spent approximately $1.25 billion on the Vancouver Winter Olympics;
this past summer Canada hosted both the G8 and the G20, which together cost a reported $1 billion.

In less than six months, the Government spent over $2 billion on three events, but continued to claim that they could not afford to build a proper school in the Attawapiskat First Nation. How can this be true?

Furthermore, during the Olympics, Canada showcased our aboriginal heritage—the official logo an inukshuk, the mascots inspired by traditional First Nations creatures, and the First Nations Chiefs celebrated in the ceremonies—and used it to enhance their international reputation.

This use and abuse of First Nations peoples, brings back haunting memories of arguably, the single most shameful act in Canadian history: the residential school system. Throughout the 20th century, aboriginal children were taken from their homes and placed in schools, where they were stripped of their culture, and in many cases mentally and physically abused.

The Canadian Government has made official apologies to the Aboriginal community and given compensation to victims of abuse. Nevertheless, one would expect that the government would pay particular attention to ensuring the rights of Canada’s aboriginals, especially in regards to their education. So why do the children of Attawapiskat still go to school in cramped trailers, on a toxic waste site?

The most shocking part of this story is not that the Government will commit to spending billions of dollars on fighter jets and prisons, but claim to be poor and powerless when asked to provide equal education for all children. Nor is it that Canada continues to be irresponsible when it comes to Aboriginal affairs.

What is truly alarming with these (in)actions is that Canada is in direct violation of the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child—a human rights declaration which Canada claims to have played an “instrumental role in drafting and promoting” (publichealth.gc.ca)—and no one seems to care. As Dr. Blackstock explains, “the convention guarantees children the right of non-discrimination,” violated in giving First Nations children significantly less in funding for education than other Canadian children. It also “guarantees the right to culturally based education that respects Indigenous languages” which is made “almost impossible” by inadequate funding.

“We believe this has continued for so long because caring Canadians know nothing of it. The Federal Government is able to give children less because they think Canadians don’t notice,” says Dr. Blackstock.

As a Canadian, I am ashamed. As a student, I am outraged.
In the coming months Riverdale will be joining the fight for equitable education for the First Nations children of Attawapiskat, initiating a letter writing campaign and bringing awareness to the community surrounding this issue, and along with thousands of other Canadian children help make Shannen’s Dream a reality.

Talk to your history or social science teacher to find out how you can become involved, or visit shannensdream.ca for more information.