

## CANADA

# Native kids seek UN probe of schools

Heart-wrenching letters tell of crowded classes, mice eating their snacks

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Schools filled with mice that eat children's lunches. No playgrounds or doors that close properly. A lack of school supplies, books or gyms.

A host of these problems, found in reserve schools across Canada, are poignantly laid out in heart-wrenching letters from First Nations children — part of a report to the United Nations urging the body to investigate historic inequities in native education.

"(It's) not fair when children are crowded in a classroom and it's not fair that mice eat the snacks," wrote one student named Angelique. "It's not fun when cold winds are in the school. It's not fun at all!"

The report, "Our Dreams Matter Too: First Nations children's rights, lives and education," will be released on Thursday in Gatineau and submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Shannen's Dream Campaign put together the report along with Cindy Blackstock, head of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Soci-

ety of Canada, and Irwin Elman, the Ontario provincial advocate for children and youth.

Shannen Koostachin of Attawapiskat First Nation began Shannen's Dream. She was a student who went to school in Attawapiskat in run-down portables on a site next to a 50,000-litre diesel spill.

Koostachin died in a car accident in June 2010. Her efforts have recently led Ottawa to commit to accelerate funding to build an elementary school in the remote, fly-in community.

"I hope the world hears what the Canadian government so far ignores," Blackstock told the *Star*. "This should be front-page news."

On average, First Nations kids are funded anywhere from \$2,000 to \$3,000 less than non-native kids, but that number can be much higher depending on the province.

In some cases, there are no schools at all so kids are sent hundreds of kilometres away to cities such as Thunder Bay or Timmins.

In the past 10 years, seven First Nations teens from remote reserves attending high school in Thunder Bay have been found dead — most in the rivers running into Lake Superior.

Six of the teens were boys. The last to be found in the Kaministiquia

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 cant 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 play ground.  
You can make a difference if you  
give the a new school.

One child's letter describes deplorable conditions at another school.

River, on May 11, was Grade 9 student Jordan Wabasse, who had gone missing on Feb. 7.

Blackstock hopes the UN will order what is known as an "Article 45" review exploring inequities in edu-

cation, child welfare and health-service delivery on reserves.

Aboriginal education on reserves is the responsibility of the federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

First Nations education is a priority for the federal government, said Michelle Yao, director of communications for Aboriginal Affairs Minister John Duncan.

"I can tell you that our government has held discussions with the Assembly of First Nations and we look forward to continued progress on important issues such as governance, education and economic development," she said via email.

To that end, they are looking at arranging a First Nations-Crown gathering in the winter.

Premier Dalton McGuinty has previously told the *Star* he would like to work with First Nations in Ontario to improve schools, but education is a federal responsibility. He has been unable to bring his full-day kindergarten program to Ontario reserves.

It is stunning, noted Elman, that when students die in the river in Thunder Bay, governments are unable to act and instead blame each other on jurisdictional issues.

"The values of Canada are that we would not allow this to happen — I really want to believe that," he said.

On average, three out of four native teens drop out of high school. Native teens living in poor, remote communities have one of the highest suicide rates in Canada.