

# First Peoples Child & Family Review

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## Foreword

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Special Edition by Children and Youth in Honour of Shannen's Dream

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## Foreword

Emily Williams and Brittany Mathews

Coordinating Editors of the *First Peoples Child & Family Review*

In 1979, the only school in Attawapiskat First Nation was contaminated by a diesel fuel leak. The Government of Canada finally closed the school in 2000 after repeated complaints from students, families and school staff that they were getting sick. As a temporary measure, the government set up portable trailers next to the contaminated site. However, as the years dragged on, the portables began falling apart, with the heat often going off and the doors not closing to keep the elements out. Shannen Koostachin and her fellow Cree youth went to school in these unsafe conditions. Nearly ten years after the government failed to deliver on its promises of a new school, Shannen and her classmates led a movement for “safe and comfy” schools and quality, culturally-based education for all First Nations children with the support of her community. After Shannen tragically passed away in 2011 attending high school away from home, her loved ones founded the campaign, Shannen’s Dream in her memory.

As we write, Nations and communities across these lands grieve First Nations, Inuit, and Metis children who died in residential schools and are affected by their enduring legacy. On May 27, Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation identified 215 children buried at the site of the Kamloops Residential School. Shortly after,

the Cowessess First Nation identified 751 unmarked graves at the former Marieval Indian Residential School. These findings confirm what Survivors have always known about residential schools and told Canadians, particularly during the course of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

Residential school Survivors participated in the TRC to protect future generations of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis kids and youth. Yet Shannen and her community’s experiences show us that the legacy of residential schools shaped their education and continues to shape this generation of First Nations children. Today, Canada continues to underfund First Nations children’s education and other public services such as child welfare, healthcare, housing, and water. This means First Nations children continue to attend unsafe schools, receive inadequate support, and face limited access to education in their communities and languages. Shannen’s Dream has not come true. First Nations communities have always known how to educate the next generation. Shannen’s Dream echoes this understanding and calls for education that honours First Nations communities’ distinct rights, sovereignties, cultures, languages, ways of knowing, and relationships to their lands.

It is with great pride that we present to you this Special Edition by Children and Youth in honour of Shannen Koostachin and Shannen's Dream. This issue's submissions by kids and youth learn from Shannen's experience and action, explore the unfair ways First Nations kids are still treated by Canada, and articulate the change that is needed to ensure all First Nations kids and youth have the opportunity to pursue their dreams. The young authors in this issue remind us that children and youth understand colonial injustice and deserve opportunities to meaningfully participate in the learning and action required to end it. It is essential that we centre, learn from, and stand with youth like Shannen and the authors in this issue.

Shannen's courage and vision call us to action and affirm the power of youth to speak truth to power. In testament to this, we begin this issue with a 2008 letter by Shannen and her classmates, Chris Kataquapit, Solomon Rae, and Jonah Sutherland to the Government of Canada seeking participation in the United Nation's review of Canada's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child (UNCRC). We are inspired by the passion, wisdom, and strength of these youth, the young contributors to this issue, and all kids, youth, and community who learn, speak, and act in pursuit of justice. We are grateful to all the young authors and creators for sharing their reflections and voices with us and respectfully peer-reviewing one another's work. We are uplifted by their vision.

In good spirit,

*Emily Williams and Brittany Mathews*