

ABORIGINAL EDUCATION KEY TO FUTURE

Arthur Williams

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The youngest, fastest-growing demographic in Canada is also the same group with the highest high-school dropout rate and lowest percentage of university graduates.

Former Prime Minister Paul Martin wants to change that. After leaving politics in 2006, Martin founded the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative to support projects which improve aboriginal education at the elementary and secondary level.

“In too many parts of the country aboriginal students are sent to schools that other Canadians would refuse to send their kids to. There is no labs, no vocational programs,” Martin said. “It is not only reprehensible ... it is also dumb. Dumb as a bag of hammers.”

On-reserve schools are funded by the federal government, he said. Across Canada on-reserve schools receive an average of 30 per cent less funding per student than provincially-funded schools.

With Canada’s aging population the country needs a new generation of skilled professionals to replace the waves of baby-boomers headed for retirement, he said.

“Forty-three per cent of aboriginal students off reserve don’t graduate (high school). Sixty per cent on reserve don’t graduate,” he said. “We cannot afford to let one talent fall by the wayside, but that is what we are doing by the thousands of thousands.”

Poverty is an epidemic among Canada’s First Nations, Inuit and Metis populations, he said. During the discussions leading to the proposed Kelowna Accord, aboriginal leaders identified education as their top priority to break the cycle of poverty.

“I co-chair the Congo Basin Forest Fund. You all know what’s been happening in the Congo. I’ve been in some places that are God-awful,” Martin said. “(But) there are reserves, particularly in the north, that are every bit as bad as any place I’ve been in Africa.”

The solution to aboriginal poverty in Canada cannot be legislated or imposed from outside, he said. Any solutions will come from partnership and recognition that aboriginal communities don’t function the same as non-aboriginal communities in Canada.

“People build up their values over centuries,” Martin said. “Why are we prepared to accept that the Japanese and Koreans look at things differently, but not that the people who’ve been here before the majority of our ancestors even knew (North America) existed do?”

The Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative currently operates four programs across Canada. The first, the Aboriginal Youth Entrepreneur Project, offers entrepreneurship training for aboriginal students in a culturally-sensitive way, he said. The course motivates students to see the value of education.

“We have two schools in British Columbia. Charles Hays (Secondary) School in Prince Rupert... (and) Britannia (Secondary) School in Vancouver,” Martin said. “There are at least 27 schools in B.C. with majority aboriginal populations. We should be in every one. But to do that we’re going to need help.”

The Initiative also sponsors the aboriginal accounting mentorship program which partners students with accounting firms to mentor and encourage interest in accounting.

The Promising Practices website is a clearing house for best practices in aboriginal education.

The initiative is also working with two band-operated schools in Ontario to focus on improving student success.

“Together we do have the power to make change,” Martin said. “The next generation of aboriginal youth can be the generation which starts businesses, creates employment... creates the great music and paints the great paintings,” he said. “All it takes is our will to work together.”