

DEVELOPING YOUNG ABORIGINAL ENTREPRENEURS PAUL MARTIN HELPS TO OFFICIALLY LAUNCH PROGRAM AT THOMAS SIMPSON SCHOOL

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LIIDLII KUE/FORT SIMPSON

A new program at Thomas Simpson School that is building up young entrepreneurs in the Deh Cho got a boost on May 6 from a former prime minister.

Paul Martin, Canada's 21st prime minister and the founder of the Martin Aboriginal Educational Initiative, speaks to students and dignitaries at Thomas Simpson School on May 6 during the Fort Simpson launch of the Aboriginal Youth Entrepreneurship Program. - Roxanna Thompson/NNSL photo
Since January, 10 students at the school in Fort Simpson have been taking the Aboriginal Youth Entrepreneurship Program. Thomas Simpson School is the first school in the NWT to offer the program and one of 17 schools across Canada to currently be running it.

The program was developed by the Martin Aboriginal Educational Initiative. Paul Martin, Canada's 21st prime minister and the president and founder of the organization, participated in a special ceremony on May 6 to officially launch the program at the school.

"I feel very proud to be here," Martin said addressing the students in the program as well as the local dignitaries who had gathered in the school's gymnasium for the event.

The program's goals are to teach aboriginal youth about business and entrepreneurship and to encourage them to complete their high school education and go on to post-secondary studies. The program gives students a chance to understand the opportunities that are available out there for them, said Martin.

Having an understanding of the economy as well as what makes large and small businesses work is important, he said.

"We felt it was really important that aboriginal kids, Metis kids and Inuit kids have a real opportunity to understand that," said Martin.

Martin was joined at the ceremony by representatives from Enbridge Inc. The company partnered with the Martin Aboriginal Educational Initiative to provide funding to allow the program to be offered at Thomas Simpson School. Enbridge has committed to three years of funding while the initiative provides professional development support for educators and the curriculum materials specifically put together for the program.

Jim Broomfield, who teaches the course at Thomas Simpson School, said the program's layout and its interactive activities used to reinforce concepts makes it unlike any regular school course.

"I think it's a fantastic program," he said.

In the Grade 11 portion of the program, which the school has been offering since January, students are challenged to develop an idea for a business. The workbook for the program walks the students through all the steps of planning for that business. They include writing a mission statement, identifying the resources needed, learning about appropriate regulations and insurance and making plans for distribution, suppliers and production.

The program requires that mentors from the community help the students write their business plans, which have to be completed by the end of the semester.

"It's not done in isolation, you're tying people in," said Broomfield.

The program has inspired the students involved, Broomfield said. He said students stop in between classes to discuss their ideas and what they have been working on.

"I see it instilling a sense of pride not only in themselves, but in what they do," he said.

The students are gaining business acumen and learning what it takes to own and run a business and the financial aspects involved in that, he said. Broomfield said he's impressed by the business ideas the students have developed, ranging from a local hair salon to a business that rents boats and ATVs to tourists.

Donovan Punch, 19, hopes to turn his business idea into a reality. Punch developed Midnight Sun of the North Fisheries, a business that will provide local fish to retail stores and restaurants.

Punch plans to raise the fish, including Northern pike, lake trout, walleye and whitefish, in fish pens in the lake beside his home community of Trout Lake. In addition to the creation of jobs, as a way to give back to the community Punch plans to release two per cent of the fish into the lake every year to replenish stocks.

"I'm helping the environment and providing a good service," he said.

To complete his business plan Punch has spent countless hours researching fish farms and can speak knowledgeably about oxygen levels in water and food requirements for growing fish. Punch said he's never taken a course like this one before.

"It's a good opportunity to learn how a business is started and run," he said.

Punch recommends other students also take the program.

"It's a good and interesting experience," he said.

The school plans to offer the Grade 11 portion of the program again in September followed by the Grade 12 portion, during which students further develop a business idea and create a website for it, in January 2014.