

EX-PM KEEN TO PAY FOR NATIVE STUDENTS

Nick Martin

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Former Prime Minister Paul Martin wants to personally finance a business program for Aboriginal students at a Winnipeg high school.

"It's teaching aboriginal students about business, as a way of staying in school and not dropping out," Martin said in an interview Wednesday.

The credit course would teach Aboriginal students entrepreneurship, and provide them with funding to develop and operate a business.

He presented his idea behind closed doors Wednesday afternoon to Aboriginal leaders, bureaucrats, and university presidents attending a two-day round table on aboriginal education at the University of Winnipeg. Martin has introduced his idea as a pilot project at Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School in Thunder Bay, Ont., where it is now in its second semester for grades 11 and 12 students.

"We hired an Aboriginal teacher," he said.

The teacher works with aboriginal students on a program that helps them develop business plans and learn to become entrepreneurs.

Martin said he wants to extend the pilot project across the country. It would eventually be offered in grades 9 through 12, he said.

"We're in discussions. We want to work with the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs," Martin said. "We're looking at a high school that has a large proportion of aboriginal, First Nations, and Métis students."

Martin declined to speculate about a specific high school in Winnipeg.

Carlana Lindeman, Northwestern Ontario regional for Ontario's Ministry of Education, said that Martin's program is a two-credit course that falls under senior business studies in Ontario's high school curriculum.

"The value-added that Mr. Martin is bringing in, the kids can access funding to start a business," Lindeman said.

"Members of the business community are mentoring students one-on-one" as well, she added.

She was not aware how much Martin pays for the Thunder Bay program, but said that it includes field trips to businesses, job placements, and frequent guest speakers.

"The Grade 11 course is teaching kids what entrepreneurship is all about, and developing a business plan,"

Lindeman said. "Grade 12, they implement a business plan."
The students also develop a web page, she said.

One Thunder Bay student is selling her own jewellery. A young man takes orders to design art for the office or home. A third student is selling a range of dog biscuits that she developed.

The pilot project started with 15 Grade 11 students, Lindeman said.

Winnipeg School Division board chairwoman Kristine Barr said she hopes to hear from Martin soon.

"What Paul Martin is looking at is a very interesting idea. I'm certainly aware of his commitment to aboriginal youth, and the work he's doing, including Thunder Bay. We would be more than willing to listen to his ideas, and work co-operatively with him in order to find ways to better serve our Aboriginal students and the economy here in Winnipeg," Barr said.

Martin also said that he wants to establish a centre of best practices that pulls together ideas from around the world that have been proven to help young aboriginal people get the best possible education.