

## **EX-PM LAMENTS EDUCATION GAP MARTIN SAYS OPPORTUNITIES FOR NATIVE KIDS LACKING**

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Winnipeg Free Press

RUSSELL -- There's an appalling gap between the education opportunities for aboriginal kids and the rest of Canada's youth, says former Prime Minister Paul Martin.

He's bridging that gap 10, 15, sometimes 20 students at a time.

He'll be doing it this morning at Major Pratt School in Russell, where most of Waywayseecappo First Nation's teens go to high school.

On Sunday, Martin was in Fort Simpson, N.W.T., then Opaskweeyak First Nation near The Pas Monday, and Grand Rapids Tuesday, hopping across the country to boost the education of aboriginal youth.

On Friday, he'll be at Gordon Bell High School in Winnipeg.

Martin goes wherever educators and aboriginal leaders ask him to offer a specially designed business entrepreneurship credit course to grades 11 and 12 students that's now offered in 17 Canadian schools, five of them in Manitoba.

"I believe very strongly that cultural background, traditional values, are an important part of their ability to learn quickly," Martin said in an interview Tuesday evening.

The Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative is now in its fourth year, after starting at an aboriginal high school in Thunder Bay serving students from remote communities on Hudson Bay and James Bay.

OCN and Winnipeg's Children of the Earth High School started a year ago -- the other three in Russell, Grand Rapids and Winnipeg started this winter. He lets them have several months of the classes to get comfortable before officially launching them with a personal visit.

Europe has long had success with teaching entrepreneurship, marketing, accounting and business practices in high school, but no one had adapted it to aboriginal culture and practices, and to specific business and economic conditions in their communities, the former Liberal prime minister explained.

His initiative pays for summer training for teachers and supplies the specially developed textbooks; principals choose the students with the best chance for success in small one-semester classes.

It's nonsense to say there's only one successful way of doing business, Martin scoffed.

While it's too early to say if the initiative has succeeded in helping young aboriginal students get a post-secondary education, so far within high schools, "Our attendance rates are much higher than the average of the schools, our graduation rates are higher.

"They're learning everything from marketing to accounting, to how to handle people who work for you, to how do you raise money to get ideas off the ground," Martin said.

"A student in Grand Rapids (Tuesday) morning wants to open an RV park -- there isn't one, and a lot of tourists come," Martin said. "In Fort Simpson, halfway up the Mackenzie River, a student wants to develop an app for securities trading.

"Children of the Earth is one of the stars of the whole panorama," said Martin, who heaped praise on Manitoba's Department of Education for its eagerness in embracing the program.

Martin also lauded Waywayseecappo First Nation and the Park West School Division for their pilot partnership, in which the reserve school has joined the public school division but remains an equal partner in determining how the reserve students will be educated.

Martin lambasted the federal government for inadequate funding of reserve schools and for not providing the same quality of education as public schools.

His Kelowna Accord back when he was prime minister recognized that gap and would have provided billions of dollars to put aboriginal children on a level playing field with kids in the provincial education system, lamented Martin.

"There is absolutely no excuse for the federal government not to provide education funding," he said. "That's immoral, and it's also economically dumb."