

EX-PM: SCHOOLS MUST MEET ABORIGINAL NEEDS; PAUL MARTIN'S EDUCATION INITIATIVE AIMS TO KEEP STUDENTS IN CLASSES, OFFER BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

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Providing better education in the early years for aboriginal Canadians - the fastest-growing segment of the population - is key to improving their social and economic well-being and this country's future.

That was the message from former prime minister Paul Martin, who told the Aboriginal Human Resource Council Inclusion Works and Voice of Change conference that his goals include bridging the gap in education for First Nations youth starting in the elementary and high school years.

"I believe if Canadians understood the discrimination in aboriginal education and child welfare, I don't think they'd stand for it," Martin said in an interview.

In 2006, he and his family set up the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative - a not-for-profit organization working with First Nations communities, governments and the private sector to improve education opportunities for young people.

So far, the initiative has established three programs aimed at stemming the dropout rate among aboriginal youth - 60 per cent of students on reserve and 43 per cent off reserve, compared with 9.5 per cent in the non-aboriginal population.

"Think what it means in large parts of Saskatchewan and Manitoba where Statistics Canada projects that in seven years, aboriginal children will account for up to half the students entering school," he told the conference, attended by 400 people Wednesday.

"Think what that means in the City of Toronto, which unbeknownst to anyone here, has the largest aboriginal population of any city in the country."

One program is operating at primary schools on two reserves in southwest Ontario where the focus is improving student literacy and math skills, as well as providing more professional development for teachers. The plan is to eventually implement the program in First Nations schools across the country.

Two high school programs are also up and running. The first is a partnership with the Institute of Chartered Accountants and is a mentorship program for kids who want to get into the field.

The Youth Entrepreneurship Project gives Grade 11 and 12 students the opportunity and funding to start a business while earning high school credits.

All the projects include aboriginal content. Meanwhile, the Promising Practices in Aboriginal Education website is bringing educators together online to share their programs and best classroom practices.

For Autumn Eaglespeaker of Calgary, the work being done at schools on reserves is important, but considering more than 50 per cent of aboriginals don't live there, more needs to be done for children attending urban schools.