

## **EX-PM WANTS BETTER SCHOOLING FOR ABORIGINAL YOUTH**

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The Standard

NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE - Canada isn't doing enough to educate its indigenous youth, said former prime minister Paul Martin in a speech at the Indigenous Education Summit in Niagara-on-the-Lake Thursday.

Martin addressed a crowd of more than 200 aboriginal leaders, educators and community representatives gathered for the two-day conference.

"Many conferences look at defining the problems, but this is to assess the solutions that are working," said Jerry White, an organizer and professor at the University of Western Ontario.

While progress is being made, Martin said, more needs to be done. The federal government isn't providing fair funding, which is causing severe inequality in the education system, he said.

"It's overt discrimination when students who go to a school on reserve receive substantially less per capita than students who go to a provincial school a mile away," he said.

"It is Ottawa's responsibility to provide the funding. ... And then what has to happen is all of us, including the provinces, have to work in partnership. Partnership doesn't mean somebody tells you what to do, it means we work together on the problem."

Since leaving politics in 2008, Martin has tried to address aboriginal issues through the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative, an organization he founded with his family.

He said he first became aware of the issues aboriginal communities face as a teenager. Martin had hitchhiked north and started working on the Mackenzie River. All the friends he met there were Inuit, First Nations or Metis.

"We would go sit by the river and we talked about what they wanted to do in life," he said. "These kids who I worked with, there wasn't a goal. Most of them at that time didn't have Grade 8 and came from very tough backgrounds, and they knew they couldn't get a job down south and there was no hope.

"I thought it was so unfair."

Martin's organization is focused on creating programs at the elementary school level.

If children don't learn to read by the time they're in Grade 3, he said, they'll spend the rest of their lives playing catch up.

The goal of the summit is to find ways to reach students and convince them education is worthwhile, said White.

Niagara-on-the-Lake is hosting the event because of the role aboriginals played in the War of 1812, he added.

In Canadian history, “there were periods of time when settler colonies needed aboriginal partners,” said White. “The war of 1812 was a bright point after most of those relationships were thrown in the waste bin. We hope this highlights there has been a whole series of movements backward and forwards.”

Aboriginal students:

- The high school dropout rate for aboriginal students on reserve is 60%, compared to 43% off reserve. Non-aboriginal Canadians have a high school dropout rate of 9.5%
- University degrees: 7% of First Nations, 9% of Metis and 4% of Inuit have a university degree. That’s compared to 23% of non-aboriginal Canadians who have attained a degree.
- In 2007/2008, aboriginal adults accounted for 22% of prison admissions although they represent only 3% of the population

— Source: Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative