

FORMER PM'S NEW PROJECT AIMED AT KEEPING FIRST NATIONS STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS

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REXTON - The idea is to keep kids in school by expanding the boundaries of the traditional classroom, and it is being propelled by a former prime minister.

Paul Martin, Canada's 21st prime minister, was at Bonar Law Memorial High School yesterday to announce a new entrepreneurial mentorship program for First Nations students.

The school is home to many Mi'kmaq students, many of whom live in nearby Elsipogtog, the largest reserve in New Brunswick and the second largest in Atlantic Canada.

While the newly signed partnership between the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative and the New Brunswick government is targeted at encouraging First Nations students to stay in school and enter the business world, Martin explained that it will have important ripple effects on Canada's economy.

Indeed, Martin said just as Aboriginal peoples helped European settlers overcome the unforgiving climate of a strange new land, he said Canadians must also turn to its First Nations to help solve a looming human resources crisis.

"This is saying to Canada's Aboriginal peoples, just as 300, 400 years ago we needed you to survive, we're saying that again," said Martin, who noted that the pilot project is a first in Atlantic Canada.

Martin said Canada must provide the educational resources it took away from First Nations communities through devastating policies and the disgraceful residential schools fiasco.

"We owe it to the young people of this country, the young members of the First Nations to provide them with the education that their society had provided and we took away," he said.

"We also owe it to ourselves because we will not build a strong country if we turn our back on the youngest, fastest growing segment of our population."

Martin said that Canada is one generation away from lacking a million skilled workers to sustain a growing economy.

"If we are not prepared to reach out to the youngest and fastest growing segment of our population we will not be able to compete," he said.

"We are a nation of 33 million people, and we're competing with India and China. We cannot afford to waste one bit of talent."

Martin told the students and community leaders present about how Premier Shawn Graham demanded, over a spaghetti dinner at his home, that New Brunswick be the first Atlantic province to host the mentorship program.

Yesterday, after he signed on to support the program on behalf of the Province of New Brunswick, Graham was enthused by the potential of the program and the students who will benefit.

"This program will give First Nations youth the best opportunity to learn," he said.

Martin recounted an example of how the program changed a young man's life in Thunder Bay -- the first of five Canadian cities in which it is currently implemented.

He said he remembers meeting a student who could barely pronounce more than two words in public. He said the student had likely only signed up for the program under the influence of peer pressure.

When Martin returned to Thunder Bay six months later, he said the student was almost unrecognizable.

Martin watched as the former introvert gave a compelling presentation about his business idea, and demonstrated through his business plan how it would make money.

"You begin to see some incredibly emotional things," said Martin.

"It is the recognition that the world out there is full of possibilities."

Martin said one of the strengths of the program is that in addition to the advice and tools that students will receive from mentors, they will also have the chance to turn their business plans into reality.

"They will actually be given a certain amount of money to go out and start a business," said Martin, who hopes to see the pilot project expand throughout Canada.

In addition to the new programs in Rexton and Sudbury this year, programs will continue in Thunder Bay, Prince Rupert, Edmonton, Regina, and Winnipeg.

The program will focus on improving students' competencies in math, English, business, accounting, marketing, information technologies, communications, and leadership through classroom learning, simulations, contests, conferences, mentorship, and visits to businesses.

At Dennis Franklin Cromarty First Nation High School in Thunder Bay, the program's success rate grew from 15 per cent in its first year to 75 per cent last year.

Lawrence Keoughan, the superintendent of District 16, said he has reason to believe the new mentorship program will help reduce drop out rates and motivate students.

"Schools and their programs have to be relevant, they have to engage students," he said.

"We are very hopeful that with this program we will be able to engage students in a way we haven't been able to do in the past."

The program at Bonar Law Memorial High School will be administered by Heather Little.

Elsipogtog Chief Jesse Simon said the program will be a vital step in diversifying his community's economy and contributing more to the province's economy.

"We can only survive on federal funding for so long," said Simon.

"I'm hoping that with programs like this my people will be able to become bigger players in the Kent County economy."