

MARTIN SEEKS NATIVE CASH; EX-PM CALLS ON OTTAWA TO RECONSIDER RESIDENCE FOR ABORIGINAL STUDENTS

Tanya Talaga

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The lack of funding for proper schools for First Nations children is "immoral discrimination" that flies in the face of Canadian values, says former prime minister Paul Martin.

A proposed student residence for northern native children forced to move hundreds of kilometres from home should be backed by the federal government, Martin said in an interview with the Star.

Since 2000, seven First Nations children who have relocated to Thunder Bay to go to school have been found dead in local rivers.

"You should not take out a 14-year-old kid, from a community of 300 people, and then plunk them down in a boarding house in Thunder Bay, where they are all by themselves," Martin said from Montreal.

Six of the seven students went to Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School, a First Nations-run school funded by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC).

In an effort to provide better care for these kids, the school wants to build a residence that can house at least 125 students.

But so far the government has turned them down, said Martin.

"It makes absolutely no sense. They are condemning those kids," he said.

Martin retired from public life in 2006 and then immediately began the Martin Aboriginal Initiative devoted to improving entrepreneurship and education among First Nations people.

He will receive an honorary degree for his public service from the University of Toronto on June 3.

All Canadians should be concerned that the per capita funding for a First Nations child going to elementary or high school is anywhere from 20 to 40 per cent lower (depending on the province) than what non-native kids get on a per capita basis, he said.

"That is simply immoral discrimination . . .," he said. "We should immediately cease the underfunding."

Martin tried to eliminate the woeful discrepancies in education underfunding with the Kelowna Accord, a \$5 billion plan to improve the lives of First Nations people signed in late 2005.

But just days after it was signed, the Liberal minority government fell. Prime Minister Stephen Harper scrapped the deal after he was elected.

Premier Dalton McGuinty said if the federal government were to provide equal funding and turn over responsibility to the province, he'd "jump at the chance" to work with First Nations people to improve the schools.

Thunder Bay's DFC high school has a student body of nearly 100 kids and a residence is sorely needed, said Jennifer Manitowabi, executive director of the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council, the group that runs the school.

She put together a proposal for a residence and gave it to INAC, who told her this is an off-reserve initiative and they wouldn't get involved.

Since then, INAC has asked them for an improved proposal. The first phase of the residence would be for 125 students and it would be built adjacent to the school, she said.

"I understand it takes time to find dollars and to build buildings," she said. "But the kids can't wait five years. They are dying today."