

PAUL MARTIN HEADS ABORIGINAL BUSINESS PROGRAM

THE CANADIAN PRESS - November 17, 2008

A new pilot program headed by former prime minister Paul Martin will give aboriginal students more business training so they can help develop their local economies.

The project aims to encourage more aboriginals to pursue careers in accounting by placing promising students with mentors from two major accounting firms in Fort Frances, Ont., and Brantford, Ont.

Martin said the program presents a "small but promising window" to allow students to pursue careers in accounting and business that they hadn't previously considered.

"Accountancy is such a basic part of the whole financial world, and the whole financial world is such an important part of the business world that it just was a natural," he said a news conference Monday.

"There are not a lot of aboriginal accountants in this country and the recruitment is very slow."

Chief Gary Allen from the Nigigoonsiminikaaning First Nation in Fort Frances said his community needs to train people who can assess the financial benefits of different projects such as mining, forestry and tourism.

"In my community, in terms of economic development, we're looking at water power generation, we're looking at partnerships in mining, we're looking at partnerships in forestry, tourism," Allen said.

"And one key component of all those is finance – looking at the demographics, looking at forecasting and the economic benefits. So we need to develop the capacity at an early level, because our students just are not picking up these trades."

Up to six students will participate in the mentoring program at three high schools in Ontario in the first year – two in Brantford and one in Fort Frances.

Kevin Dancey, head of the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants, said he hopes the project will eventually expand across the country.

"We are starting small – two to three students in Fort Frances and five to six students in Brantford," Dancey said.

"It is important to start with a pilot, to learn from it, and to make sure we are doing this right."

The partnership, which stemmed in part from the friendship between Martin and Dancey, isn't seeking any government funding and will be largely supported by Martin's Aboriginal Initiative as well as by the participating accounting firms, BDO Dunwoody in Fort Frances and KPMG in Brantford.