

Commentary on Aboriginal Education in Canada

The Right Honourable Paul Martin



My Experience

When I was going to university, I spent a few summers working in Canada's far north. It was in this region where I first became friends with many young Inuit, members of the First Nations and Métis Nation. These were people my own age, yet their life experiences were certainly much different than my own.

About five years ago as Prime Minister, retracing the steps I had taken as a young man, my wife, Sheila, and I travelled across the same region visiting communities in the Yukon, Nunavut and the Northwest Territories.

Each stop, from Pond Inlet to Watson Lake, was distinctive. But what became familiar to us, was the welcome and the smiling faces of the children in each community. As we walked the streets a parade of children would join us, and in their eyes you could see the curiosity and the hopefulness that only the young bring to each day. They seemed to want to ask us everything and show us everything.

But there was a counterpoint to these wonderful moments. The elders, with

whom we met, too often painted another picture, one of an intolerable gap between the hopeful promise of youth and the ultimate experience of Aboriginal adulthood.

The elders had seen the cycle of despair repeat itself too many times. They would tell us that the infectious optimism of youth would eventually give way to hard realities and cold truths. When I think of the friends I had made, and the tragedies of too many of their lives, I know the elders were right.

The Issues

With few exceptions, the history of indigenous peoples throughout the world is one of unspeakable mistreatment, and Canada is no exception to this. On virtually every indicator from infant mortality to shortened life expectancy, Canada's first peoples are too often our forgotten people, and that is wrong. It is morally wrong and economically indefensible. At a time when Canada's 34 million people are faced with new and tough competition from China, India and Brazil, it is clear we cannot afford to let one talent fall by the wayside, and yet that is what we are doing by the thousands upon thousands of our youth.

Aboriginal Canadians represent the youngest and fastest-growing segment of our population. The number of Aboriginal Canadians is predicted to grow at three times the national average during the next decade. It is not surprising that when you ask the country's Aboriginal leadership what they see is the solution to the dilemma of so many of their children's lives, their response is better education.

The Federal government's underfunding of education on reserve is a major obstacle in improving Aboriginal student achievement. Indeed, the underfunding of education was one of the major reasons for the Kelowna Accord in 2005 between the Federal government, the Provincial and

Territorial governments and Canada's Aboriginal leadership. Unfortunately, the accord was not implemented by the new Federal government.

Another issue is the role of parents. We know that a key factor in student achievement is parent involvement. Research shows that there is a significant improvement in graduation rates when parents take an active role in their children's education. There is a historical reason for the reluctance of some Aboriginal parents to be directly involved in their child's education. This flows from the residential schools' issue – a tragic episode in our history. There is much more we need to understand about its long-term and multi-generational impact on Aboriginal families.

Martin Aboriginal Initiative

I believe strongly in the future of Aboriginal Canadians. One of the keys to that future is to address the 44 per cent high school drop-out rate off reserve and the 60 per cent high school drop-out rate on reserve.

In 2006, after stepping down from government, my family and I established the Martin Aboriginal Initiative (MAI). MAI's activities are focused on two areas: the Capital for Aboriginal Prosperity and Entrepreneurship (CAPE) Fund and the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative (MAEI). Our overall goal is to work with First Nations, the Métis Nation and Inuit Canadians to enable them to enjoy greater economic self-reliance and an ever-increasing quality of life.

MAEI brings together Aboriginal organisations, the business community, post-secondary institutions, First Nations schools, Provincial and Territorial education authorities and provincially-funded school boards to implement programmes to support Aboriginal students. We want to

serve as catalysts by sponsoring pilot projects that show that a strategy is successful in improving Aboriginal student achievement and then to support others to deepen and expand the initiative.

To date, MAEI has launched four programmes across Canada:

- **Aboriginal Youth Entrepreneurship** This programme provides Grade 11 and 12 students with entrepreneurial experience and the opportunity for business ownership while they earn high school credits. The curriculum includes Aboriginal content, including case studies and examples of successful Canadian Aboriginal business leaders. Using innovative hands-on activities, guest speakers, and business mentors, Aboriginal students learn how to create a product or service-based business. Funding is provided to start each micro-business and, using the services of local banks, students open and maintain accounts, and must comply with all required record-keeping and other accountability measures. Each student is mentored by established business people, including Aboriginal business owners, throughout the planning and implementation process. This programme is under way in Edmonton, Prince Rupert, Regina, Thunder Bay and Winnipeg. In September 2010, the programme will expand to Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario and Rexton, New Brunswick.
- **Accounting Mentoring** This programme encourages Aboriginal youth to complete high school and pursue careers in accounting. The Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants (CICA) is partnering with MAEI, national accounting firms and school boards to mentor Aboriginal

youth who have an aptitude/interest in accounting careers. Participating secondary school students are identified by their teachers. With parents' permission, participating accounting firms mentor these students. The accountants will work with the young people over several years in various activities, including job shadowing, co-operative education placements, summer employment, scholarships/bursaries and internships. It is hoped that colleges and universities will also support these young people as they pursue their post-secondary studies. The pilot projects are located in Brantford, Edmonton, Fort Frances, Thunder Bay, Winnipeg and Vancouver. In September 2010, it will be expanding to two additional locations in Ontario: Owen Sound and Sudbury.

- **Promising Practices in Aboriginal Education Website (<http://www.maei-ppw.ca/>)** This website was created to foster the exchange of promising classroom practices and research. The site enables the collection and publicising of curriculum materials, classroom practices, relevant policies and research related to successful practices in elementary and secondary education. Educators, researchers and others use the site to enhance and share learning opportunities and to improve educational success for Aboriginal students. We expect the website will expand to include Early Childhood Education and Mentoring.
- **Model School** Five-year initiatives have recently been established with two on-reserve elementary schools. The focus is to improve student achievement in literacy and numeracy through the use of on-going student assessment, data collection, purchase of classroom

resources to support higher student achievement, and professional development focused on supporting teachers in their daily practice. The two Model School projects will incorporate Aboriginal culture and materials, and support enhanced parent involvement. We hope that the successful strategies and resources will be implemented in First Nation schools across Canada.

Conclusion

I believe strongly that Canadians want to ensure that the next generation of Aboriginal Canadians becomes the generation of real and positive change: the generation that stays in school; the generation that is given the tools to succeed; and the generation that breaks the cycle of poverty, that builds the great companies, that discovers the new truths of science, that writes the great music, and that paints the great paintings. But for this to happen, we must enable the First Nations, the Métis Nation, the Inuit to build on their strengths.

Ours must be a society in which all who live in Canada without exception, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, stand shoulder to-shoulder: equal in opportunity, dignity and quality of life. But this will only happen if all of us join with Aboriginal Canadians as they take control of the forces which impact their lives. The single most important factor that will allow them to do this is the education of their young people. There is no more time to waste.

Related websites

- Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative:** <http://www.maei-ieam.ca/index.html>
- Capital for Aboriginal Prosperity and Entrepreneurship Fund:** <http://www.capefund.ca/en/home.html>