

## **ABORIGINAL EDUCATION INITIATIVE INTRODUCED**

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Opasquia Times News - October 19, 2011

The Right Honourable Paul Martin, a former Prime Minister of Canada, was at the Oscar Lathlin Collegiate on Friday to announce the launch of an Aboriginal youth entrepreneurship program. Oscar Lathlin is the first reserve school on reserve to become part of the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative (MAEI), funded by Scotiabank's Bright Future community giving program.

The dignitaries arrived at 8:30am and were greeted by Chief Michael Constant as well as two members of the Opaskwayak Educational Authority (OEA). With the Right Honourable Paul Martin were several senior representatives of Initiative partner Scotiabank. Ron Constant, principal of Oscar Lathlin Collegiate, guided them on a tour of the school.

After the tour, the dignitaries gathered with students and teachers in the gymnasium. After a prayer to bless the day and food to come, Chief Constant took the podium. "I welcome our former Prime Minister to our traditional territory," he said before speaking about the Initiative. He underlined its importance as an opportunity. It would give OCN youth "the tools you need to move forward as young people."

On behalf of the OEA, Chair Gerrald Lathlin also spoke a few words: "We were very excited to be selected and we thank you, Mr. Martin, and your team." "A program like this couldn't come at a better time," he continued. "It'll give our students the tools needed to succeed in the business world." He continued to explain that students selected for the Initiative would have mentoring every step of the way.

The Right Honourable Paul Martin spoke next. "When they described how beautiful this school was," he began, "I must say I had no idea. This is one of the most beautiful schools I have ever been in."

The MAEI includes teaching and mentorship for those in grades 11 and 12. Select students in grade 11 learn how to prepare a business plan. As part of the program, grade 12 students will receive \$500 in start-up capital to implement their plan and manage a micro-business. The Initiative encourages youth to stay in school and work within their community for the betterment of the whole.

Mr. Martin explains that the workbook used by the teaching course was written by indigenous peoples for indigenous people. "The future of this country depends on you," he declared to the assembled students, "and that makes me feel very good about this country."

George Marlatte, Scotiabank Senior Vice President for the Prairie Region, was brief. He reiterated the program's benefits, thanked Mr. Martin and Principal Constant, and stated that Scotiabank was pleased to partner with MAEI and OCN. "The youth of this community are vibrant and have tremendous potential," he continued. "We are proud to be supporting that potential."

After these speeches came a question-answer period. In response to one question, the Right Honourable Paul Martin told a story of working with Aboriginal youths when he was younger, "There was one thing that struck me. They did not share the same hope for the future as [others]." "This is a beautiful school," he gestured to the gymnasium. "You're not going to find schools like this on reserves across the country, and that is wrong." When asked about the decision to include OCN in the program, he noted that most MAEI schools were part of the provincial educational system. The first MAEI school was a reserve school, but it wasn't on reserve land.

“When you’re doing a first, you want to be in a place where the students can act, where they can understand,” he continued. “You’ve got to have a community where they want to make it work.” MAEI only goes to communities with the drive for positive change. “We want to work with them,” explained Lucie Santoro, the program’s Administration Director in a later interview.

The dignitaries met with teachers and students after the Q&A. Then they toured with OCN business partners such as the Kikiwak Inn and Atawewan Mart. At 11:30am, they returned to Oscar Lathlin for a feast of locally prepared duck soup and bannock. “I want to say thank you, Principal Constant,” said the Right Honourable Paul Martin in parting. “This has been a wonderful, wonderful morning.” “The future depends on you.”