

CAN'T LOSE TALENT, FORMER PM SAYS

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The youngest and fastest growing portion of Canada's aging population is aboriginal.

However, this important demographic has one of the highest secondary school dropout rates in the country -- around 40% for those living off reserve and 60% for those on.

"We are an aging population on the one hand and we're facing tremendous competition from economies of India and China ... it's pretty clear we can't afford to lose a single talent," said former Prime Minister Paul Martin. "We can not waste the talent of any more young Canadians -- First Nations, Metis or anyone. But that's what we are in the process of doing."

Martin was in Sudbury to sign a partnership agreement between his Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative, Laurentian University and Sudbury's two English school boards, launching a first-of-its-kind pilot project aimed at encouraging First Nation and Metis youth to attain more education.

The project will enable aboriginal youth to earn high school and university credits at the same time. While colleges have dual credit programs, Laurentian is the only Ontario university approved by the province to do so.

Spread over three years, it will allow 60 students from the Rainbow District and the Sudbury Catholic District school boards to take courses at Laurentian in three streams -- native human services, commerce and environmental studies.

It's designed to give them a taste of university, skills to excel in a post-secondary setting, as well as a foot in the door when they graduate from high school because they will have university credits.

"What's happening here at Laurentian is unique," said Martin. "Ours is a high school program. The president of this university was very actively involved in aboriginal education when he was at the Ministry of Education at Queen's Park. Because of his insight, he suggested there was an opportunity to take our program and provide young students with a dual credit ... This vision comes from Laurentian University."

The pilot project is a good fit for Laurentian, which has a student body that is 11% aboriginal and has a tri-cultural mandate, said president Dominic Giroux.