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Aboriginal literacy pilot project dramatically improves test scores

JOE FRIESEN

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In 2010, elementary students at a pair of First Nation reserve schools in Ontario were struggling badly on basic literacy tests. Five years later, after an intensive intervention that taught teachers new methods, raised expectations for students and introduced a mandatory 90 minutes of daily reading and writing instruction, their test scores have improved dramatically, a result its backers hope will encourage governments to adopt its lessons for tackling the gap in indigenous educational achievement.

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The Model School Project, known as Wiji Kakendaasodaa, was launched at the Hillside School on the Kettle and Stony Point First Nation and at the Walpole Island Elementary School in September, 2010. The project was funded in part through former prime minister Paul Martin's aboriginal education initiative. Its goal was to demand more of teachers and to see students reach their potential. Nearly 40 per cent of indigenous Canadians did not graduate high school, and the figure is nearly 60 per cent for First Nations people on reserves, rates that far exceed the Canadian average.

Mr. Martin, who will present a report on the project in Toronto on Tuesday, said the program focuses on literacy because it is crucial to long-term success.

"Kids were not learning to read and write by Grade 3, and if you don't learn to read and write by Grade 3, you are handicapped all the way through," Mr. Martin said. "Bringing the literacy numbers up to the provincial average became essential for us. The question was, 'How do we do it?'"

Mr. Martin, in collaboration with the local chiefs and schools, brought in a team led by Julia O'Sullivan, the dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. They assembled education experts to work with the local teachers under a model the Ontario government used to turn around struggling schools a decade ago.

"We focused on improving the quality of teaching because we know once children step into school, it's the quality of teaching that makes the difference," Dr. O'Sullivan said. "When I agreed to do this, I said to Mr. Martin, 'I'll declare this a success not when people think the children can read better, not when people feel the children can read better, but when I have solid evidence that they actually have improved significantly.'"

Dr. O'Sullivan called the program "a phenomenal success." The year before it began, only 13 per cent of students achieved the provincial standard on grade three reading tests, and only 33 per cent met the standard on writing tests. By 2014, just less than 70 per cent of the school's students met the reading standard, very close to the provincial average, and more than 90 per cent met the writing benchmark, significantly higher than the Ontario average.

Craig Lindsay, vice-principal at Hillside, said his school has been transformed. It used to be that if students were asked what they liked to read, they responded that reading was hard, there were no books at home or that nothing interested them, he said.

Now nearly everyone reads, he said, and parents have been engaged through family literacy days and events that recognize student achievement.

"Number one is getting the teachers on board and believing in the students," Mr. Lindsay said. His school has about 140 students from kindergarten to Grade 8, all First Nations, and classes are mainly in English, although Ojibwa is taught in every grade.

When he arrived from outside the community, Mr. Lindsay said he got the sense from some teachers that the students could not meet high standards.

"They'll never be able to do it, don't worry, do what you can, that kind of attitude. I've never felt good about that, and I always pushed my students, but it was easy to accept where they were at the end of the year. Now we're not going to accept that," Mr. Lindsay said. "You know you can do better. It's just that drive, we believe in the students and the students are believing in themselves."

Mr. Martin said he hopes the program, which he described as fairly expensive, will be expanded to other reserves, which are under federal jurisdiction. But that will be up to the federal government and local band councils, he said.

"What this demonstrates so clearly is what indigenous education can be," Mr. Martin said. "The dropout rates you hear about on reserve, these are issues we can attack and we can win the