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## Local News

### U of M lab for kids could nurture future scientists

By: Nick Martin

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Medical students could soon be working with inner-city aboriginal kids in a \$250,000 science lab at Niji Mahkwa School, a lab that would be open to the community evenings and weekends.

The idea comes from Dr. Francis Amara, director of the biomedical youth program at University of Manitoba's medical school, principal Rob Riel said Tuesday.

U of M and Niji Mahkwa School are organizing a private \$250,000 fundraising campaign to pay for the lab, raising the possibility of setting a precedent for public schools to use private money for capital projects to build basic school needs.

"There is a need for more aboriginal people in the fields of medicine and science," Riel said. "He's (Amara) trying to build a community lab as a model. He wants to let the community know they have the capability to jump into the fields of science and medicine.

"They're really looking at an untapped resource, at what the inner-city can offer," Riel said.

Niji Mahkwa is a nursery to Grade 8 Winnipeg School Division school with a 100 per cent aboriginal enrolment. Amara hopes that six or seven inner city schools could eventually build such labs, said Riel.

Riel said that Niji Mahkwa will get the kind of "high-end science lab" usually reserved for high schools. "In junior highs, they don't build those. In elementary and junior high, they don't happen," he said.

The classroom is now used as a temporary lunchroom.

Amara envisions the science lab being open to the community to use evenings and weekends, said Riel, adding that Amara is out of the country this week.

"He's looking at a community-based science lab based in a school. We're searching for money" through grants and private donors, Riel said. "Hopefully, there will be other people who support this, and donate to help this happen in other inner-city schools."

The provincial government funds capital projects in public schools, including building classrooms, labs, and gyms. On rare occasions, school divisions will construct school facilities out of their own funds.

An aide to Education Minister Peter Bjornson did not immediately have an answer Tuesday whether the minister or the public schools finance board (PSFB) would approve private financing of the proposed lab. The Doer government refused several years ago to allow parents to raise money privately to build a classroom at crammed island Lakes Community School.

Another provincial official said that the science lab would be a 'minor capital project' that the division could finance directly through whatever source of money it can find. But the province could not specify Tuesday where the cut-off point would be.

"It's a very exciting project," Winnipeg school board chair Kristine Barr said Tuesday. "Science students are coming in and offering unique science programs."

Barr said that building a lab is "further down the road, if they can raise the money. I don't think this is a precedent. We've always taken the position, we work with our community organizations."

"I haven't heard anything about it. That is totally amazing," school board finance chair Jackie Sneesby said.

Sneesby said that she is not aware of the division's having ever approved a capital project for a school's core needs to be funded privately. "It's always been a no to anything like that," she said.

Sneesby said there was a brief item on the Feb. 4 board agenda noting that \$15,000 provided by the Winnipeg Foundation would be spent on painting and new shelving at Niji Mahkwa School, but nothing about raising \$250,000 for a new science lab.

As for the program, Sneesby was enthusiastic: "It's a terrific idea," similar to the partnership between Children of the Earth High School and Pan Am Clinic for a medical internship during high school. Anything that can be done to make inner city and aboriginal children comfortable with a career in science or medicine, should be done, Sneesby said.

Donations can be made to the Children's Heritage Fund of Winnipeg School Division, account number 88860590RR0001.

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What is the University of Manitoba faculty of medicine doing with Niji Mahkwa School?

Medical students visit the inner city public school once a week to work with students in grades 5 and 6. Niji Wahkwa is a nursery to Grade 8 school with an aboriginal student population.

The children go to the medical school in July for a science camp, which could be held at Niji Mahkwa once the science lab is built.

The school hopes to raise \$250,000 for a science and technology lab which would also be available to the community on evenings and weekends.

Are schools allowed to finance basic needs through private fundraising?

That is not clear. Wolseley School parents obtained community and government grants to build a bigger gymnasium than the province was going to provide.

Parents at Oak Bluff Community School financed a computer lab through parents paying \$5,000 a family to place the family name on six classrooms.

Private fundraising builds school playgrounds and tracks -- but they are not considered basic needs, and are not covered by the public schools finance board's capital funding.

The Doer government refused to allow parents at Island Lakes Community School to buy a portable for their overcrowded school.

Officials say that letting Niji Mahkwa raise money for a science lab in the school could create a precedent that allows other private capital projects in schools. Parents at Queenston School have already talked about building a new gym through private fundraising.

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