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## NEWS LOCAL

### Marching for equality for First Nations youth



By Carl Hnatyshyn, Postmedia Network  
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Groups of marchers made their way down Christina Street on Monday sporting signs supporting fairness in the fields of education, health and child welfare for First Nations youth. (Carl Hnatyshyn/Postmedia Network)

Scores of Sarnians bearing handwritten letters to the prime minister turned out at Centennial Park on Monday to voice their support for equality for First Nations children, youth and families.

The group was participating in a national advocacy walk called Our Dreams Matter Too, an event held at locations across Canada that strives to raise awareness about critical issues facing First Nations children. After meeting at Centennial Park, the group made their way to the post office on Christina Street to mail their letters before returning to the park for a lunch and further discussion.

Coordinated by the First Nations Caring Society, the purpose of the walk was to highlight inequities between First Nations and non-First Nations youth with regards to issues such as health, child welfare and education, as well as to put pressure on various levels of government to give children on reserves the same rights enjoyed by other children, said Native Friendship Centre executive director Liz Plain.

"We're going to mail letters to Prime Minister Trudeau to advocate for equality for our children with regards to poverty issues, education, child care, housing, water, and many, many other issues," she said. "The prime minister promised new relationships, new programming and to upgrade services and to enhance education and childcare, so we're upholding him to his promise. Hopefully he'll make a new relationship with the urban aboriginal community as well as to First Nations, Metis and the Inuit."

Several provincially-funded programs that are offered to students off-reserve are not available for on-reserve children, said Plain, including the Best Start program, the Infant Mental Health program and the Pre-School Speech and Language program.

Excluding First Nation youth from access to these programs compounds their problems and further alienates them, marginalizing a population already struggling with high levels of child poverty, substance abuse and suicide as well as low literacy levels, she said.

"We're really hoping that Prime Minister Trudeau upholds his campaign promises and that he fulfills them. We're may just be a small community but we're part of a bigger whole."

While 2016 is the fifth year that Our Dreams Matter Too walks have taken place nationally, Monday was the first time the walk had taken place in Samia-Lambton, said Samia-Lambton Children's Aid Society executive director Dawn Flegel. Members of both the Native Friendship Centre and the Children's Aid Society thought holding a local would help community members see the disparities that exist between on-reserve and off-reserve youth, she said.

"There are three local First Nations in Lambton County and I think that a lot of people don't know about the inequities that exist," Flegel said. "Once people find out about it and are aware of it, they get outraged and they start asking questions. Like why are there differences? Why do First Nations children get less for their education than other Canadian kids? It just seems unfair and it doesn't fit with what we think of as Canadian values. So by participating in the walk we want to raise that awareness."

While putting pressure on political leaders is one avenue to help fix the inequality between First Nations and non-First Nations youth, education is a far more important tool in the long-term, Flegel said.

"I think it just goes to our education system – it needs to teach our children about these issues," she said. "I grew up and I knew a little bit but had no idea about the extent of the inequities that exist."

Giving First Nations youth the same opportunities as their peers requires the support of the whole community, Flegel said.

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