

# BACK TO HERITAGE:

## A Different Kind of School for American Indian Adolescents

*By Marsha Riddle Buly & Chris Ohana*

*"The teachers look at us as people who are here to learn about the culture, not just trying to get us through and out of their hair: These teachers try with us."*

The United States system of education is far removed from the historic system of education in many American Indian communities, yet most American Indian students attend state-run public schools, often with little or no input from tribal communities. Something is clearly not working because many American Indian students experience high levels of educational failure and many drop out of school (Sherman, 2002).

In this article, we present an alternative to the traditional state-run public school for one group of American Indian adolescents. We describe the first year of a grades 6-12 "choice" school, within a public school system, that utilizes a project-based approach to education with a focus on local tribal culture. The school is somewhat unique because although it is located on a reservation and the student body predominantly (94%) identifies as American Indian, the school is within a public school

system with a predominately White student body.

### COMMUNITY CONTEXT

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American Indian students comprise approximately 3% of this Northwest state's public school enrollment and approximately 7% of the enrollment for the district described in this article. Prior to the opening of the new school, two option schools, one for grades 6-8 and one for grades 9-12, were located on the reservation. These two schools operated primarily on a contract basis. Students came to school to receive assignments and to meet briefly with teachers for instruction or directions, they turned in assignments, and they took tests. Minimal student time was spent at school. Drop-out rates were high.

Attendance figures for the school district show that American Indian students across the district were missing school at an alarmingly high rate. The year prior to the choice school opening there were 444 ongoing, district petitions for truancy in the local county Juvenile Court. Of those, 103 were for American Indian students (23%). In 2000, the school district reported an approximately 7% drop out rate for students in grades 9-12. Dropout rates for students at the contract-based school were approximately 13%. In addition, 73% of the American Indian students in the district had lost

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credits in 2 or more classes because of poor attendance, compared to 34% for White students.

Poor attendance often leads to depressed learning and achievement. Secondary level test scores in the school district for American Indian students revealed wide disparities. For example, students at the previous contract-based school scored dramatically lower on the vocabulary section of the 1999 11<sup>th</sup> grade ITED. The district average was 54, the average for students enrolled in the contract-based school was 11.

The historical data clearly suggested that the previous school system was not meeting the needs of many American Indian students in grades 6-12 across the school district. This caused great concern among the tribe and the school district, resulting in the understanding that there was a need to change the way that school was conceptualized for American Indian students. In the fall of 2001, the two contract-based schools were collapsed into a new choice school to serve students in grades 6-12.

Prior to the opening of the school, district personnel (contract-based school counselor, principal of the contract-based school, district Indian Education Coordinator) and community members met together to discuss what the new school should be like. As stated by one community member, "it had to be different."

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## CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

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Many theories exist to explain the low performance of American Indian adolescents, such as: low expectations of teachers, lack of commitment by parents, or a lack of high standards for schools (Chavers, 2000). Differences between native culture and school culture, ignorance of native culture among school staff, differences between students' and teachers' values, differences in native students' learning style, poor motivation of Indian students, language differences of students and teachers, and students' home and community problems have also been postulated (Gilliland, 1992). Undoubtedly student difficulties could be attributed to one or more of the reasons cited, or yet to other reasons.

According to McIntyre, Rosebery, and Gonzalez (2001), successful curricular designs for minority students put the experiences and knowledge of the students at the center of learning. For Alaskan Natives, a growing body of research suggests better learning occurs when teachers transform their educational practices and the curriculum reflects the home culture from which children come (Lipka, Mohatt, & the Ciulistet Group, 1998).

Traditional mainstream White education is based primarily on European-American values which do not give American Indian children any avenue to dignity, honor, and pride and do not ensure their interest in school. As a result, American Indian children are bound to fail in the traditional White school. Culturally-relevant pedagogy has often been suggested as important to improving the academic performance of American Indian /Native Alaskan students (e.g., Cleary & Peacock, 1998; Dehlye, 1992; Delpit, 1995; Demmert, 2000; Klug & Whitfield, 2003).

When we change the way we think about school, we must be careful not to emphasize a basic-skills mastery orientation, or "pedagogy of poverty" (Bradford, 1999). At the same time, there are basic skills that are critical to students' future school, and life, success. To ignore students' needs or to fail to identify and work with missing skills unfairly disadvantages American Indian students. A dual focus that both provides meaningful, culturally relevant pedagogy and makes sure that the instruction is geared to the needs of students seems imperative (Lankford & Riley, 1986).

One pedagogical approach that theoretically combines culture with appropriate instruction is described in the principles behind Expeditionary Learning, an

outgrowth of Outward Bound. Jerry Lipka (1998) reminds us that the culture, language, and geographical areas of indigenous communities vary widely. As a result, to prescribe specific programs is not reasonable. Expeditionary Learning is not a prescribed program; rather it is a different way to think about instruction (see <http://www.elob.org/aboutel/principles.html> for a full description).

The academic emphasis of the Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound (ELOB), aligned to the projects that students would be engaged in, matched the goals of the district and state. At the same time, the principles underlying ELOB matched many of the tribal desires and beliefs and also matched the goals of the tribe's Cultural Resource Center to rediscover traditional lifestyles and activities.

The traditional languages of the people, along with the traditional crafts, were almost lost in the early part of the 20th century when children were forced to go to government boarding schools. The boarding school movement was an attempt by those who "believed that with the proper education and treatment Indians could become just like other citizens" which basically meant assimilating American Indians into white mainstream culture (<http://content.lib.washington.edu/aipnw/marr/marr.html>).

## GETTING STARTED

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A grant was secured to fund a school designer who would work with the staff to understand the principles of Expeditionary Learning and help the staff develop "expeditions" or projects relevant to the student body and district goals. The training was scheduled for August and the new school was to open in September. The district recognized the need to begin work prior to the opening of the new school and hired university faculty who had a working relationship with the district and the Indian Education coordinator to do some preliminary planning with the staff.

This is how we became involved with the project. One of us is a literacy professor, the other is a science education professor (with a rich background in mathematics education). We enlisted a social studies professor to also serve as a content area consultant.

Three teachers, all from different indigenous communities and all of who had worked in the prior contract-based school, made up the teaching staff of the new school. The principal was an American Indian from the community. The school counselor, responsible for initiating the grant

to secure funding for a startup grant, also would teach some courses in the school. This was the staff that we met with in June of 2000 to begin to outline possible expeditions and identify ways in which expeditions could address district and state requirements.

As we developed our relationship with the staff and district, we were asked to serve as local evaluators for the grant that funded the Expeditionary Learning portion of the school design. The data that we report comes from that which we collected in both our capacities: as consultants before the school opened and as grant evaluators after the school opened. We employed case study methodology with data coming from a wide variety of sources: interviews, observations, documents, and achievement and attendance records.

Planning for the curriculum was a daunting task. It was unfamiliar territory for all, but many resources were available. Cultural consultants included elders, officials of the tribe, language experts, and social services for the tribe. Using an Expeditionary Learning template, the participants wove together "expeditions" based on tribal culture. The content and structure of the expeditions were aligned with state learning standards.

The changes in curriculum, structure, and cultural context constituted an immense logistical and intellectual challenge. In order to make it less overwhelming, it was decided to focus on a few expeditions in the first year and expand them in following years. Expeditions were planned that centered on carving and cedar weaving, drum making, and an end-of-year feast. The school also planned classes in the tribal language, as well as other cultural art classes.

## THE FIRST YEAR

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The school opened in the Fall of 2000 with the following objectives:

- m Increase attendance.
- m Increase achievement.
- m Increase cultural attachment.
- m Increase positive beliefs and attitudes.

Fifty students enrolled in the first year. Of those, 28 students left in the course of the year. The change from a contract-based credit-retrieval program to a structured school did not meet everyone's needs. Those students who stayed became strong advocates for the school.

The students who remained appreciated two aspects of the school above all else. In private interviews, the students

constantly mentioned the personal attention by the teachers and the culture-based curriculum as a fundamental improvement over previous student experiences in the public schools.

Many resources contributed to the culture-based aspects of the curriculum. Tribal artists helped teach classes in weaving and drum making. The tribal language re-emerged in the schools after decades of absence. Students interviewed elders, wrote biographies, published a newsletter, made drums, beaded, and studied water quality in a culture dominated by their connection to their marine environment.

One student noted that she felt "Like a historian of the tribe...learning from the elders. We learned work ethics and how to conduct ourselves with respect." Students valued this new type of school, "I never finished/accomplished things before. Now I finish and move on to new things." Students were consistent in their appreciation of both the cultural content and the "project-based" aspect to their learning. Students saw more purpose and connection to their schooling.

Students also felt a deep connection to their teachers and to their counselor. The adults knew each student and often went out of the way to help him or her. Students kept referring to the school as a "family." In one case teachers visited an incarcerated student and tried to help him make different decisions. Many students reported that this connection to the teachers kept them in school, "personally, it has kept me in school. When I was ready to give up, the teachers and staff were there to give me the attention I wanted."

The culmination of the school year was a feast for the Elders that was planned and prepared by the students. The students expressed their appreciation for the opportunities they had over the year and the help from parents, teachers, and community.

Teachers also felt a sense of accomplishment over the year. They felt the project had considerable success and that students were asked to "create, not just fill in the bubbles." Another teacher remarked that the students' individuality was shining through and the students were ready to take on even more responsibility for the school and the curriculum. Just as the students had changed, the teachers had changed from a canned curriculum to one they had control over. As an act of faith, they also wanted the students to assume more control.

Community members also noticed a difference in the students. They knew their students got lost in the large district high

school. They saw students, many of whom were considered at risk, taking on responsibility for themselves and the tribe. One tribal leader noted that the new school needed to be marketed differently because in the previous school, failure was what got the attention of the district. This time, success needs to get them noticed.

## CHALLENGES

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This school year was a radical departure from the previous school. The structure, curriculum and pedagogy had changed. It is natural to experience some growing pains. The school community has several issues to address. One is that the school remains isolated from the district. One teacher noted that they were "invisible." The school requires more administrative support to maintain and extend the successes in the first year. This support needs to be institutionalized and not be dependent on the good will of a handful of teachers and an external grant.

While students' attitudes toward learning improved, few noticeable gains in achievement were made—at least as measured by state and district-mandated exams. The school must maintain the culturally-relevant curriculum while still meeting mandated learning outcomes.

## THE FUTURE

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All of the current students planned to return in the following year. The teachers have summer support to continue to work on expeditions and curriculum that would be rigorous, creative and demanding. In order to meet the criteria of the tribe and the district—that students be prepared for lives both on and off the reservation—an expanded focus on integrating state standards with an appropriate culturally-based curriculum is critical. Without either one, the school will lose its foundation of support and its chance for success.

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