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INDIAN TEACHERS AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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The Need for Innovation and Change

Although my introductory remarks do not necessarily describe all schools serving Native youth today, there are still many that continue to fit the pattern. Too many schools serving Native youth represent themselves with a veneer of modernism and political correctness when. It is an unfortunate reality their cultures remain rooted in an aged legacy, in a framework developed in the 25-year period after the Civil War when schools for Indians were administered by the Department of War. *All* schools serving Native children need to adapt to the reality of modern society.

The reality of modern life is that information and services reign supreme and dominate our economic and commercial markets. Manufacturing, ranching, farming, mining, exploration, and other production industries have taken a back seat to the production of knowledge and the delivery of services (Chavers, 1980). Farmers, who made up 15% of the population in 1950, now account for only 1.5% of the population.

Blauch (1939) pointed out over half a century ago that Indian schools were notoriously slow to adapt and change. This remains true today in many schools. In my own research (Chavers, 1976), I found teachers at four BIA boarding schools that took

37 months on an average to adopt and use an innovation—if they used it at all. Consequently, many reservation schools, which still function to make Indian children into blue collar workers, ranchers, and farmers, are very much out of step with the realities for which we should be educating our Native children and youth. Our new reality says that the future of Indian students is to attend college and earn college degrees.

Student Outcomes

The need for change in many schools serving Native students is not only reflected in an outmoded curriculum but also in the academic performance of the students who attend them. I believe the very poor outcomes of Indian students in schools exist in proportion to the low expectations of teachers, the lack of commitment by Indian parents, and the lack of high standards for Indian schools. Fifty percent of Indian high school students do not graduate, compared to 20% for the nation. Over 80% of Indian college students never graduate, compared to the national college dropout rate of 45% (Chavers, 1991). Currently, 67% of all high school graduates in the U.S. enroll in college upon graduation from high school (U.S. National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1996). In contrast, only 15 to 20% of Indian high school graduates enroll in college.

Indian students, to be successful in college, need to be well-prepared readers. The facts indicate, however, they are not reading. Indian students read less than one book per year outside the classroom (Chavers, 1995b). In five different data sets we examined, these stark results stood out. The worst case found that Indian students at one BIA boarding high school were reading less than one quarter of a book per year outside the classroom.

Many Indian dropouts are high-potential students who simply become bored with school because it is too easy. Few— probably less than 10%—are taking the college preparatory courses needed in math, science, language, foreign language, computers, writing, and reading.

Staffing at Indian Schools

I believe the two major underlying problems in schools serving Indian students are staffing and socialization of non-Native teachers. Indian schools have often been called outposts of colonialism in the U. S. If this definition means that they are set apart from the Indian community, then it fits many schools serving Native youth today. The Indian community operates in one social sphere; the schools operate in an entirely different sphere. They exist side by side within the same boundaries, but it is almost as if the two social groups ignore each other.

The teachers in Indian schools are often just out of college. They typically stay one to two years, then leave. Most of these schools have an annual teacher turnover rate of 35% or higher (Chavers, 1987). Schools that are geographically isolated have annual turnover rates as high as 90%.

Teachers at Indian schools are typically graduates of state teacher colleges. Seldom are they at the top of their colleges or even their high school classes. In one district, none of the teachers at any of the seven schools had scored in the top quartile of the National Teacher Examination (NTE). Most of them scored in the second and third quartiles, but a significant number scored at the bottom (Chavers, 1995a).

The unfortunate truth is that too often teachers in Indian schools are those who cannot get hired in a big city. They take whatever job they can obtain, and sometimes it

is on an Indian reservation. Principals assume they cannot lure students from Ivy League schools and the top regional universities to their school sites, so they seldom try to recruit from them.

Once on the reservations, teachers typically live in a segregated compound. Often, they are set apart from the Indian community, seldom interacting with its members. Few non-Native teachers learn the most rudimentary words of the Native language, such as "Hello," "How are you," and "Good bye." Very few of the Indian schools encourage their non-Indian teachers to learn the local Native language.

Keeping Indian Parents out of the Schools

The separation of the dynamics of schooling from the family and the community is a clear carry-over from the earliest days of federal boarding schools, when anything Indian was deemed to be bad. Teachers in schools in most native communities seldom have personal contact with the parents of their students. This practice reflects a school culture that incorporates a variety of mechanisms to keep Indian parents out of contact with their children while they are in school. I recall many of these dynamics from my own early schooling. Unfortunately, vestiges remain today. Social trends affecting the larger society are often inappropriately applied.

One legacy of this culture in our schools is that parents have to sign in at the office before they can go to their child's classroom. In schools for Native American youth, signs all over the school warn parents they have to sign in first. In some schools, secretaries seem trained to ignore parents as long as possible, to keep them waiting in the office while other things are going on. According to my own observations, school secretaries often exercise inordinate gatekeeping powers where parents and community

members are concerned. Do some school secretaries go to a special college to be taught to be as mean as possible? At this Academy of Rude Secretaries, when they can no longer ignore the parents, they learn to snap responses such as, "What do you people want?" or "Are you back again?" or "Are you people being helped?" uttered with bulldog subtlety.

Indian parents who visit the school too often get a whispering campaign started against them. The Rude Academy teaches that Indian parents are not likely to be involved in their children's education and to label those who are as *troublemakers*. If they are big troublemakers, someone in the front office is trained to announce them on the intercom, broadcasting their presence to the whole school. Another legacy in schools is that visiting parents are required to wear badges or nametags while they are on school grounds. This makes them stand out, making them feel as though they are outsiders who do not really belong in the school. It seems that non-Indian teachers are often discouraged from "fraternizing" with parents and students after school. Teachers and aides have even been fired in the 1990s for "fraternization." Instead of promoting a liaison between the home and the school, why do some schools still inhibit teacher-family contact?

Even when teachers and parents come into contact with one another, it has been my experience that the communication is often either neutral or about negative things. Neutral concerns might include taking children out of school for hospital or dental visits and trips or taking them into town on Friday for the family shopping trip. Negative things include children having behavior problems, missing too many days of school, or being suspended or placed in detention. Parents and visitors are often required to have

escorts to go from the principal's office to a classroom. Since the parents probably attended the same school 25 years earlier, the escort is just another form of intimidation.

All these barriers under the rubric of “security”—sign in sheets, mean secretaries, whispering campaigns, name tags, rules against fraternization, escorts, and others—are effective in maintaining an impenetrable wall between the school and the home. It is finally time to recognize the negative effects of these barriers and explore alternatives that do not so deftly destroy the sense of community needed in schools for our Native youth to succeed.

Even though these intimidating ways are supported by ever-evolving rationalizations, they are artifacts of our colonization—part of the old civilize-the-savage way of thinking. What we need for the future is a Native-based approach that takes the whole Indian community as the starting point for successful schools.

The Expectations of Indian Parents

Schools on reservations assume that Indian students will not attend college, or if they do, they will drop out. Many teachers, in fact, assume their Indian students will not even finish high school. Indian parents, on the other hand, assume their children will not only finish high school, but also attend college, and not only attend, but graduate. This type of thinking on the part of Indian parents has evolved within the past 30 years. In the 1960s there were still Indian parents who actively opposed the "white man's education." Indian education activists, tribal education people, university professors, most teachers at Indian schools, and others still assume there is active opposition to formal education. It may come as shock to many for me to write this, but ask any group of Indian parents

what they want for their children, and the response will be well over 95% that they want their children to finish college. I have asked dozens of groups of Indian parents this question over the past ten years, and the answers are always the same. But the expectations of Indian parents are not synchronous with the realities enacted in many schools serving Native youth. Only a small percentage of Indian schools have implemented a full college preparatory curriculum.

Indian parents think that their role in the educational process is diminished, minimal. They think their main job is to get their children on the school bus every morning; then their job is through. Therefore, Indian parents only too often wash their hands of their responsibility, their role in the education of their children. Seven generations of brainwashing by the educational community has taken hold of them. Indian parents are glad to give up any responsibility. They now have to be told, however, that they are the first and most important educators of their children and are to act accordingly.

Only in rare exceptions are Indian parents going to storm the citadel of the schools and make demands for changes. Because the majority of Indian parents are still short of having a high school education themselves, they realize that the power in the schools rests with the people who have degrees and credentials. The teachers, the principals, and the counselors are the power brokers. In my work with dozens of schools, I know of only one instance where change and improvement was initiated by the parents. In the rest of the cases, it was a credentialed person who initiated any improvements.

It may also come as a shock to many that Indian parents *know* what they need to be doing to support their children in obtaining a good education. Most progressive Indian educators, when asked, will state something to the effect, "Those poor Indian parents

do not know what they are supposed to be doing.” But Indian parents *can* and *do* state explicitly what they are supposed to do. These things include getting their children ready for school in the morning, making sure they are clean and well fed, reading with them at night, making sure the children read to them, taking them to libraries to check out books, talking to their teachers on a regular basis, and taking them to visit college campuses. But the parents also know they are not doing many of these things. Schools need to develop programs of partnership with parents and make sure parents are doing their part as well.

The Current Situation

We Need More Native Teachers

A drastic increase in the number of Indian teachers and administrators is a crucial element to not only reduce barriers between schools and the Native American communities, but also to assure responsive and effective schooling for Indian youth. Currently, there are some 1,512 schools and districts serving Indian students in the U.S. These schools serve some 445,425 Indian students. There are approximately 54,892 teachers at these schools. Over 90% of teachers at Indian schools are non-Indians (Pavel, 1997).

Teacher turnover is one of the major problems facing Indian schools. The annual turnover rate is approximately 35% (Chavers, 1987). Thus, Indian schools are hiring over 18,000 new teachers every year. The total supply of new Indian college teachers, however, is only 449 per year—less than 2.5% of the total needed (Chavers, 2000a).

This huge turnover is a recurring nightmare for school boards, principals, and superintendents. They have to hire a crop of new teachers each year to replace the

ones who are leaving. Many of these leaders would love to hire Indian teachers, but the supply is not nearly enough. The number of Indian superintendents in these 1,512 schools is only 42, or only 2.7% of the total (Chavers, 2000a). Even though almost 10% of the teacher corps is currently Indian, less than a handful of the top leadership of the schools is Indian. A large percentage of Indian students go all the way through their school careers without ever having an Indian teacher, counselor, or principal.

Teachers and the Indian Community

All Indian schools need to become part of their communities. John Collier and his followers tried an experiment in the 1930s and 1940s to integrate schools and Indian communities, but the Collier model had serious flaws. The main flaw was its philosophy of assimilation. Indian people at that time were still strongly holding on to their languages, their values, their customs, and their traditions. They reacted to Collier's ideas as they had reacted to all other such ideas—with hostility and resistance.

With the changes that have happened in Indian societies over the past 30 years, an experiment to integrate schools with their Indian communities will now work. The strong resistance that existed even 20 years ago is not present now. Indian parents will react with some skepticism at first, but in time they will endorse efforts by school administrators to include them in the operation of the schools.

Indian schools should teach Indian languages. This simple statement may sound too easy to say, and too difficult to implement. But the fact is that the protection, preservation, and promotion of Indian languages are now the law of the land (Native American Languages Act of 1990).

Teachers need to be encouraged, and in fact, required, to help repair the damage done by 125 years of enforced segregation of home and schools. They need to be the ones to reach out to parents and engage them intellectually and behaviorally in the education of their children. Where such an effort has been tried, it has worked miracles. Unfortunately, it has only been tried in a tiny handful of places. We will see progress in this area when Indian schools get their long-awaited infusion of substantial numbers of well-trained Indian teachers and administrators.

Sources of New Indian Teachers

In a study conducted in 1997-98, only 65 of 258 colleges of teacher education queried had produced at least one Indian teacher in the years 1995, 1996, and 1997 (Chavers, 2000a). Many of the colleges desire to enroll Indian teacher candidates, but most are doing little to identify them, recruit them, raise funds for them, or to form liaisons with school districts that desire to produce more Indian teachers. The main source of new Indian teachers now is colleges of teacher education. Other sources include special federally funded programs, tribal programs, tribal college programs, and school district programs. The approximate annual totals of new Indian teachers produced by these six types of programs are listed in Table 1:

Table 1. Numbers of Indian Teachers

<u>Type of program</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Total</u>
Public and private colleges of education	46	354
Federally funded programs in FY 2001	22	??
Tribal programs	2	20

Tribal college programs	7	35
School district programs	8	40
	85	449

Although there have been several types of federally funded teacher education programs (Office of Indian Education, Teacher Corps, Bilingual Education, etc.), serving Indians in the past, these programs have fallen on hard times in recent years. The OIE program was completely de-funded in 1996. Most of the others are funding few, if any, Indian programs. The new program in OIE planned to produce 1,000 new teachers in the next five years; had appropriations approved early in the year 2000; and made its announcement of some 22 grantee colleges, tribes, and nonprofit organizations in July 2000.

The most overlooked source of new teachers has yet to be tapped—Native paraprofessionals now working in the schools. The typical Indian school has 30 non-Indian teachers and 50 Indian paraprofessional and blue-collar workers. These Indian staff paraprofessionals include library aides, teacher aides, tutors, secretaries, cooks, security guards, maintenance workers, bus drivers, and clerks. Although there are 54,000 teachers in Indian schools, there are over 60,000 Indian aides, many who could be teachers in a short while with incentives and adequate support. A high percentage of Indian paraprofessionals have earned some college credit, typically between 15 and 90 hours. They could earn a college degree in as little as one to three semesters. A comprehensive program to tap this obvious resource and develop it has yet to be created. Catching the Dream has helped 55 Indian paraprofessionals earn baccalaureate, master's and doctoral degrees in the past 12 years.

At least eight school districts in Indian Country now spend their own funds to help Indian paraprofessionals earn degrees. Whiteriver School District, Arizona, increased its number of Indian teachers from 6 to 37 between 1996 and 1999. At least seven other such districts now have similar programs, including Sanders Unified, Arizona; Cheyenne-Eagle Butte, South Dakota; Duckwater Shoshone School, Nevada; Terrebonne Parish School, Louisiana; Westville Public Schools, Oklahoma; and San Carlos School District, Arizona. In time, the number of districts with similar programs should grow rapidly. Many more should obtain grant funds for teacher education if they cannot allocate funds in their annual budgets.

There are two tribes with teacher education programs—Navajo and Oneida (WI). There is a need for at least 50 other tribes to start their own programs. Oneida runs its program internally, while Navajo runs its program in conjunction with five colleges and universities.

Meeting Future Needs

A Model Teacher Education Program

Teachers need to learn how to be effective with Indian children. The standard teacher education program, which instructs on how to teach reading, science, language arts, and so on, needs to be modified for teachers of Indian students. At a minimum, these teachers ought to have the following courses in their college study:

Indian Education (NAS)

U.S. Indian History (NAS)

Bilingual Education

Multicultural Education

Social Change (anthropology or sociology) Teaching Reading

Indians of the U. S. (anthropology) Tribal Sovereignty (NAS)

Native Language Development (linguistics)

In addition, these prospective teachers ought to be exposed to the methods of schools and programs that have proven to be successful (description in the next section, "Innovations That Work in Indian Schools"). The new Indian teacher should be a different kind of teacher. The Indian teacher who came forth in the 1950s and 1960s too often had a chip on his or her shoulder. The attitude was "I made it through this awful system and survived. If my students want to make it through, they will have to put up with the same kinds of misery as I did." This type of attitude is definitely outmoded. The new Indian teacher should be culturally sensitive to his or her students and in tune with the reality of tribal sovereignty. The new Indian teacher should also be ready to work with and listen to students and parents, to subdue his or her own need to be an authority figure, and to actively foster the idea of letting Indian students and parents shine and develop the genius of the Native intellect.

Innovations that Work in Indian Schools

One of the major sources of new teachers, as well as future scientists, engineers, doctors, nurses, veterinarians, and other professionals, is new Indian high school graduates. This major source must be cultivated, trained, prepared, and counseled to prepare itself for leadership in this new century.

Within the past decade a movement dedicated to developing this talent has started in Indian schools. From the beginning this movement has been monitored and reported on

by *Catching the Dream*. A triennial directory called "Exemplary Programs in Indian Education" documents both the methods and the outcomes of these programs (Chavers, 1999a).

Seven Indian high schools are currently sending large numbers of Indian students on to college. Within the next ten years, this total should increase to three to four dozen. These schools are on the cutting edge of improvement in Indian education. In most of them, several things have happened along with improvements in student outcomes, including an increase in the number of Indian teachers, a dramatic decrease in the rate of teacher turnover, a substantial commitment to computers and technology, a strong improvement in the reading ability of students, a dramatic improvement in curriculum standards, and a strong program of outreach and commitment to parents.

- Mount Edgecumbe High School, AK, sends 70%+ of its graduates on to college each year, and has reduced staff turnover to nearly zero. It is reputed to be the only school in the U.S. that has completely implemented Deming's Total Quality Management (TQM).
- The Native American Preparatory School, New Mexico, has been in operation for five years and has sent over 60% of its graduates on to college.
- The Navajo Preparatory School, New Mexico, has sent 100% of its graduates on to college for the past two years.
- Salmon River High School, New York, sends over 70% of its graduates on to college.
- Tohatchi High School, New Mexico, sends 70% to 90% of its graduates on to college and helps students win over \$400,000 in scholarships each year.

- Wellpinit High School, Washington, has increased daily attendance from below 70% to over 90%, raised ITBS scores from below the 20th percentile to above the 40th percentile, and sends over 70% of its graduates on to college.
- White Swan High School, Washington, sends over 80% of its graduates on to college. The class of 1999 won over \$1 million in scholarship funds.

In addition, at least six schools have started down the road to improvement by establishing a priority of reducing their dropout rates. These schools include Baboquivari High School, Arizona; Cass Lake LIEC, Minnesota; Salmon River High School, New York; Wellpinit High School, Washington; Mount Edgecumbe High School, Arkansas; and Navajo Preparatory School, New Mexico. These schools all had dropout rates of 45% to 70% a decade ago; all have lowered the rates to below 10%.

Finally, at least 13 Indian schools have begun considerable increases in both reading quantity and quality for their students. These schools include Ganado Primary School, Arizona; Ganado Intermediate School, Arizona; Tohaali Community School, New Mexico; Hotevilla-Bacavi Community School, Arizona; Chinle Primary School, Arizona; Ignacio Junior High School, Colorado; Second Mesa Day School, Arizona; Camp Verde Elementary School, Arizona; Camp Verde Middle School, Arizona; Chicago Native American Education Program, Illinois; Dowa Yalanne Elementary School, New Mexico; Lac du Flambeau Public School, WI; and Piñon Middle School, Arizona.

Only two of these reading programs have been in place for over five years, the two schools at Ganado. A handful of other programs to improve reading were started and

stopped because of a change in personnel or lack of interest. But the current movement has the most potential of any development to improve Indian schools, prepare more Indian students for college, interest more Indian students in teaching as a profession, and create a new tradition of achieving excellence in Indian schools.

Conclusion

After suffering in the doldrums for 125 years, a ray of hope is materializing for Indian schools. The development of model schools has happened within the past decade and promises to spread very rapidly in the next decade. Contrary to the evolutionary notion of development and improvement, no stages are necessary for Indian schools to improve. Indian students can go from the worst to the best in half a decade, as demonstrated by the handful of schools I previously mentioned. The elements in this improvement are (a) stability in the teacher ranks, (b) equal ratios of Indian teachers to students (c) improvements in daily attendance, (d) improvements in student retention and completion, (e) parent commitment, and (f) improvements in reading. Some of these improvements—reading, attendance, high school completion—are relatively easy to bring about with commitment and good planning. Teacher stability and parental commitment are perhaps more difficult to achieve. More Indian paraprofessionals earning teaching credentials would increase the number of Native teachers as well as increase teacher stability.

At the heart of the process, however, is the most necessary ingredient—leadership. It takes leadership to see that one or two very important things are needed—then to stick by your guns to make them happen. But a major focus on only one to three areas of needed school improvement is happening in more and more schools. Tribes,

colleges, nonprofits, and government ought to expend as much energy as possible getting more Indian students into the teaching profession. The current total of less than 500 new Indian teachers each year needs to be increased to 2,000 new ones each year, and maintained at this level for a decade. If this can happen, the improvements in outcomes for Indian students will be astounding.

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