

CELEBRATING WASHINGTON'S FIRST PEOPLES

Join us Mondays and Wednesdays through Nov. 21 as we take a look at the contributions — past and present — of Washington's First Peoples.

EDUCATION

Getting an education is supposed to be a positive factor in one's life. Imagine, though, that you are a small child age 5 or 6. You are removed from your parents' home to a faraway location, your hair is cut, and the clothes you are made to wear are strange and uncomfortable. Finally, the language you have spoken all your life is forbidden; you will be severely punished if you speak English. Sounds terrifying?

This was the harsh scenario for American Indians in the education system in the late 1800s. Education was used as a "civilizing" force by the federal government to force American Indians to give up their traditional ways and assimilate into the mainstream population. John Henry Pratt, the founder of the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, has often been quoted as saying, "Kill the Indian, save the man." In actuality, he said, "Carlisle's mission is to kill THIS Indian, as we build up the better man."

Later, states were given the authority by the federal government to enter reservations to ensure that native children were being schooled. Today, American Indian youth in Washington state may attend a public school administered by the state of Washington but located on a reservation, or a Bureau of Indian Affairs school run by the federal government, or a tribal school operated by a tribe, depending upon where they live.

While there have been major changes since those early days, the education system still proves challenging for some native people today. In a March 2012 report to the legislature, the Office of Public Instruction reported that in the school year 2010 to 2011, an average of 10.7 percent of the American Indian children in grades 9 through 12 dropped out of school. This is the highest dropout rate for students in

Washington state. Comparatively, Asian American students had the lowest dropout rate at 2.5 percent. Despite these negative statistics, there are still many native people who continue on to become successful doctors, lawyers, teachers and engineers.

A variety of contributing factors may account for the high dropout rates, including higher poverty rates, less stable home environments and educational institutions providing instruction that is uncondusive to a different style of learning. Many reservation economies are struggling. Statistically, the economic and health status of American Indians across America is at the lower end of the spectrum. While many people have been left with the impression that casinos have made American Indians rich, that is not true for many tribes. Native people often feel that institutional racism exists and that some schools are not very welcoming to them. Some people believe the testing methods used to rate the performance of students are racist and skewed against American Indians.

Efforts are being made to combat these dismal educational statistics by infusing culturally relevant curriculum into the school systems and making sure that American Indian history, culture and traditions are included as much as possible. One model project developed by the state of Washington in conjunction with tribal educators focuses on using the canoe, drum and the hunt in reading curriculum for younger native students. In 2005, Rep. John McCoy, one of the few American Indians in Washington state's legislature, championed a new law, HB 1495, that encourages school districts to work with local tribes to teach their history and culture in public schools in an effort to close the achievement gap with American Indian students.

Due to historical efforts designed to eradicate native languages, many native languages are on the verge of extinction. Tribes, however, are now working to revitalize their languages. They want to use those languages to open new windows onto their traditional culture and beliefs. Language-revitalization programs help to save the indigenous languages while

instilling pride about their culture in native youths. One of the more active tribes in this area is the Lower Elwha Tribe, who have been working for more than 10 years to teach their language. Students begin learning their language in preschool through songs and stories and continue learning it through high school.

And just like the rest of the population, sports play a big role in the lives of native youth. Basketball, baseball and, to a lesser degree, football are enormously popular sports on reservations. Maybe thanks to PGA pro-golfer and Navajo Notah Begay III, golf's popularity is also increasing among American Indians across the country.



ACTIVITIES

1. Examine your own curriculum (course of study) at your school; how does it incorporate American Indian and other cultures into it? How might your schooling be reshaped to represent the various cultures that make up this country? What are the benefits for individuals, communities and our nation when a holistic approach to integrating cultural awareness/study is integrated into all disciplines throughout the entire school year? What might be some of the challenges with this approach?
2. Look through today's Seattle Times and identify articles/images that represent the diversity of our nation. What information/approach should a newspaper take to inform its readers about the cultures in its community?
3. What responsibility do we have in educating ourselves and others about culture?



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Within our natural environment and communities, children are naturally endowed with the gift for learning. As an Indian educator, I feel a deep sense of responsibility to cultivate our ancestors' vision for the overall health, well-being and spiritual needs of our people and communities. Today, it is with pride that I'm able to witness students and former students providing visionary leadership in culturally respectful ways that fosters our diverse families, tribes and society.



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