

FIRST PEOPLES

EDUCATION

Join us Mondays through Nov. 28, 2005, as we take a look at the contributions — past and present — of Washington's First Peoples.

Getting an education is supposed to be a positive factor in one's life. Imagine, though, that you are a small child of five or six. You are removed from your parent's home to a far away 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 awful?

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 Indian people 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, Indian youth in Washington state may attend a public school administered by the state but located on a reservation, or a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) school run by the United States government, or a tribal school operated by a tribe depending upon where they live.

The education system still proves challenging for some Native people today. During the 2002-2003 school years, 14.6 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 4.9 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. Many reservation economies are struggling. Statistically, the economic and health status of Indian people across the United States is at the lower end of the spectrum. While many people have been left with the impression that casinos have made Indians rich, that is not true for most tribes. Native people often feel that institutional racism exists and that some schools are not very welcoming to Indians. Some people believe the testing methods used to rate the performance of students are racist and skewed against Indian people.

Efforts are being made to combat these dismal educational statistics by infusing culturally relevant curriculum into the school systems. 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. Last year, Rep. John McCoy, one of the few American Indians in Washington state's Legislature, championed a new law to encourage school districts to work with local tribes to teach their history and culture in public schools.

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 and with those languages, 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 Indian people across America.

ACTIVITIES

- 1:** Examine your own curriculum (course of study) at your school; how does it incorporate Native American 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 to educating ourselves and others about culture?



Patricia Whitefoot, Director of "Palatisha Miyaanashma," the Toppenish School District's Indian Education Program. She is also a former Yakama Nation Councilmember.

"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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Kimberly Craven, the author, is an enrolled member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate. She recently completed an LLM in Indigenous Peoples Law and Policy at the University of Arizona Rogers College of Law and has numerous years working on American Indian policy.

CHAPTER 8:
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT