

Connecting with their culture, spirit
American Indians link traditions with studies at a
Milwaukee school

By Robert Gutsche Jr
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MILWAUKEE - When his students are in trouble, Jarod Pidgeon can burn grasses, sage or other herbs to open a connection with the spirit world. He can pray with the children or perform a ceremony inside a sweat lodge – all at his school.

Pidgeon has options unavailable to most other teachers because he works for the Indian Community School, a private religious school near downtown Milwaukee.

Here, children not only learn about the physics of a thunderstorm, they also learn about the spiritual significance of rain, its meaning and how storms add to nature – and to their very beings.

“In our daily lives as native people, our purpose for being here, our reason for being here and what we have done through our teaching and our values comes from what we call our creator,” said Principal Alan Caldwell. “Here, students learn about that, and can take it home to their parents.”

Education that incorporates the spirituality and history of native cultures is becoming increasingly popular as educators seek to give students and their families a strong foundation for life.

There are more than 50 American Indian charter schools in the United States, according to the Center for Education Reform, a think tank in Washington. About 20 of those are on reservations. Other organizations count some 150 schools that focus on students learning about their native backgrounds.

“If they are exposed to a lot of this, it can make a difference in their lives,” said Pidgeon, who grew up in Chicago and teaches the Oneida language and culture.

A \$20 million school being built

The Milwaukee school, which opened about 30 years ago, is growing so fast that administrators are closing their small, aging facility and building a \$20 million school on about 200 acres in suburban Franklin. The building, set to open this summer, will include a man-made indoor river, floor-to-ceiling windows and places to hold ceremonies inside.

The roughly 320 children attending the Indian Community School come from various tribal affiliations. Children take part in cultural activities each semester, such as preparing a feast for tribal elders, learning dance and drum methods for powwows or learning nearly lost native languages.

If students need discipline, they often are sent first to a counselor who speaks with them about their actions and perceptions surrounding behavior, helping students to understand themselves, their peers and to connect themselves to their inner spirit.

“People have taken things apart in academics,” Caldwell said. “And when we look back on our teachings, we see that water, air and light are connected to us and to learning. All of that has been taken apart.”

Paula Fernandez is the school’s cultural resource specialist and Menominee language teacher. Responsible for working with staff and teachers to ensure class lessons are connected to religion, she often visits classes and speaks on how tradition and beliefs fit in with what children are learning.

“They are always thinking about the spiritual side,” Fernandez said. “Whatever they are talking about is connected to the idea of creator, creation and our role.”

Often, students gather to pray for sick elders. Many teachers start their mornings or weeks with classwide prayer and quiet time, where students can share concerns or celebrations.

Much of American Indian culture has been lost or misunderstood as native peoples were pushed across the country, uprooted from their historic lands and assimilated through U.S. government schools. In northern Wisconsin, racial tensions still exist between whites and native peoples, with violence breaking out in the 1990s in the same way that whites and African-Americans have clashed elsewhere.

Recently, as American Indians have gained lobbying power at both state and federal levels, they have become successful in developing a gaming industry and other industries, trying to create wealth to help many native people who still live on reservations or in public housing, often in poor conditions.

‘The focus is the community’

As American Indians try to encourage this generation and the next to continue their educations, many believe the key to change is in the classroom.

Many native schools are “embedded in a community of native people,” said David Beaulieu, director of the Center for Indian Education at Arizona State University in Tempe. “The focus is the community and parents and families. ... That community aspect of a school is important for these children to have.”

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