

## Putting tribal culture in school lessons at White Clay Immersion

By Travis Coleman

Fort Belknap, Montana (AP) 12-08

For Lori Archambault, teaching friction to her students on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation is as easy as showing them how to grind corn.

The task helps her students at White Clay Immersion School better understand friction, in addition to learning a skill their ancestors picked up decades ago. Archambault, an Assiniboine tribal member, said her students comprehend most lessons easier when she incorporates their tribal language, history and culture.

She attributes the students' academic success to Native Americans teaching Native Americans, a concept that often is said to be effective but has not always been put into use on the Fort Belknap Reservation. That is beginning to change, thanks to Fort Belknap Community College's teacher training program.

"I just think that it helps to have that presence," said Archambault, a program graduate.

She is one of about 25 Native American teachers who believe Native American students perform better in schools where there are more Native American teachers or role models. Since it started in 2000, the program has infused Native American teachers into schools such as White Clay Immersion School and St. Paul's Indian Mission in Hays.

The program, which is funded by grants, provides tuition assistance for Native Americans such as Susan Werk, who said teachers pay back the loan by teaching on the reservation or in off-reservation schools with many Native American students. Werk added that Native American students often trust a Native American teacher more, which can inspire them to perform better.

"They see Native Americans can do something, and we can make it through college," Werk said.

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The program's focus is to help address two problems plaguing the state – the performance of Native American students and the lack of Native American teachers. In 2006, less than 3 percent of the state's teachers identified themselves as Native American, according to the Montana Office of Public Instruction. At the same time, about 11 percent of the state's students were Native American, OPI officials said. Native American students also made up about 23 percent of the total dropouts from Montana's high school during that same time, according to OPI statistics.

Peggy Azure, who directs the teacher training program for Native Americans at Montana State University in Billings, said there are studies that show Native American students perform better in schools they are more comfortable in.

Schools can help achieve that ideal comfort level with more Native American teachers and a culturally relevant curriculum, she said. Studies show that Native American students can become even more comfortable in the classroom when the school becomes an extension of the community, and students see reflections of their cultures in the school.

“We need pictures and décor that is Native specific, that shows the American Indian today,” Azure said.

Though Azure noted that she is not aware of any studies that tie Native American student success to having a Native American teacher in the classroom, she believes the likelihood of schools being more welcoming for those students is higher when there are more Native American teachers.

“They’re teaching from a perspective that is similar to what a Native student expects to be taught from,” Azure said.

Archambault remembers having only one Native American teacher in grade school.

“I lost a lot through the experience. You lose more than you’re actually gaining,” Archambault said.

Archambault heard about the Fort Belknap Community College’s teacher training program and applied for entry in 2000. Program coordinators recruited others to the education field from other majors. In addition to education basics, Archambault said the program emphasized how to incorporate elements of Native culture into the classroom.

After graduating from the program, Archambault landed a teaching job in New Mexico, but she never forgot the disparity in the amount of Native American teachers back home on the Fort Belknap Reservation.

“I was never fully satisfied with my kid’s education, especially the cultural aspect,” Archambault said. “I was having a lot of success as a teacher, but I needed to bring it back to my own.”

Archambault soon made her way back to Fort Belknap to teach at the immersion school, where classroom walls identify objects in the White Clay language and pictures of notable tribal members hang from the lunchroom walls.

For Archambault’s students, art class means working with pipestone and reading means learning through the tribe’s creation stories – lessons made possible by the teacher training program.

“I think the cultural aspect is the biggest benefit of having more Native teachers,” she said.

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