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A generation of racial conflict makes it difficult for students from the Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians to succeed at the district high school. Since 1998, the Intercultural Leadership Initiative has provided academic and social opportunities, promoted understanding and friendship, and helped youth overcome their prejudices.

A Community Divided

Located in the heart of northern Wisconsin's lake country, the Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians is a tribe with an enrollment of 3,000 of whom approximately 1,500 reside on a rural reservation spanning 144 square miles. Racial tensions between American Indians and their area neighbors have long run high. In the 1970s and 1980s, disputes over Ojibwe spear fishing led to violence, with angry protesters shouting, "Spear an Indian, Save a Walleye." Eventually, the U.S. District Court of Appeals upheld the Voight Decision, affirming Ojibwe treaty rights to fish, hunt, and gather on off-reservation lands and waters. Yet more than 25 years later, deep-seated racism and mistrust persist and have been inherited by a new generation.

Because of Lac du Flambeau's small population, young tribal citizens leave the reservation after eighth grade to attend Lakeland Union High School. At Lakeland Union, non-Natives compose four-fifths of the student body, and many of the incoming American Indian students experience culture shock. Some become the victims of bullying, intimidation, and fights. Some never make a successful transition into their new environment. In the 2000/01 academic year, the graduation rate for American Indians at Lakeland Union was 54.3%. By the 2007/08 academic year it increased to 67.9% in comparison to 94.3% and 93.3% for non-Indian students, respectively. While this shows improvement, the statistics are staggering and demonstrate a tremendous gap between the educational attainment of American Indians and their non-Indian counterparts. A contemporaneous report commissioned by Lakeland Union High School observed that the high school had "a toxic culture for American Indian students."

Building New Friendships

In this difficult context, the Intercultural Leadership Initiative (ILI) works to "improve academic and social success for students by reducing racial tensions and promoting cultural understanding through inter-cultural experiences." To do this, ILI works with youth in the school district's one American Indian and three non-Native elementary schools in addition to the Lakeland Union High School.

The students participate in interactive, experiential activities that help them understand local history and tribal cultures, and learn to build relationships across races. In grades four through eight, ILI holds day-long sessions two times per year in the classrooms of each elementary school. Students of all backgrounds engage and learn the significance of Ojibwe traditions, such as beadwork, cooking, and traditional games. At the high school level, ILI offers tutoring, group discussions, mentoring, leadership training, and service learning. Participation in ILI activities is voluntary for ninth to twelfth graders, reducing the number of students served but increasing the personal attention received by each participant. Recently, ILI began inviting parents and other adults to open community forums

where the important and potentially controversial issues of the day can be discussed. The purpose of all these activities is increasing cross-cultural knowledge and reinforcing positive consensus building.

ILI prides itself in teaching students about local history and culture in fun and creative ways. For example, younger students participate in role playing exercises that teach about the reservation system. Older students are invited to accompany Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission wardens and Wisconsin State game wardens for demonstrations of traditional methods of winter survival, beaver trapping, and ice fishing. Enthusiastic about participating in ILI, one student noted, "ILI broke down stereotypes, prejudice, and race for me. I no longer look at people by color, but more for their personality. Because of all this, I feel better about who I am."

ILI is incorporated as a nonprofit under the state of Wisconsin and is also a tribally chartered organization of the Lac du Flambeau tribe. Of the seven-member board of directors, at least four must be Lac du Flambeau tribal citizens. The board oversees the program's activities and finances. The charter validates the longstanding relationship ILI has with the tribe and exemplifies their joint and steadfast commitment to youth.

ILI receives consistent funding from the Lac du Flambeau tribe and the school district, and supplements its budget by raising money from foundations, businesses, services clubs, churches, and individuals. Local businesses also support the program's activities by providing in-kind donations of food or facilities. Inspired by the idea of building a stronger and safer community for all the children, over 45 organizations have become ILI affiliated partners. Support from this wide variety of community allies helps secure ILI's long-term viability and sustainability.

Cross-Cultural Understanding

At their core, ILI activities teach local youth what tribal sovereignty means and how local, non-Native communities are affected by it. An ILI staff member notes that "our [non-Native] children have inherited anger without being taught about the historical significance of hunting, fishing, and gathering by the Ojibwe people." As students reenact the experience of the two Ojibwe brothers who were arrested in 1974 for fishing off-reservation, they begin to understand that treaty rights are not "special" rights but come from historic agreements that the U.S. government and its citizens must uphold. While it may take a long time to change attitudes formed by decades of conflict, ILI is making headway. The Lac du Flambeau tribal President notes that relationships built between tribal youth and students from other schools have "made positive changes in the overall feeling at the high school, at athletic games, and in our community board rooms." Students are taking more pride in their cultural heritage, which in turn leads to better social adjustment and academic performance. Notably, in the 2006-07 academic year, an inspiring 97% of the students who participated in ILI activities graduated from high school.

Bringing the Lessons Home

Ten years ago in northern Wisconsin, no forum existed in which American Indian and non-Native youth could explore issues of race, diversity, and conflict. ILI has grown to reach almost 1,000 students and helps connect with the wider community. While there is still work to be done, ILI's dedication to cross-cultural communication and understanding has reduced school violence, improved graduation rates, and increased dialog.

Lessons in Nation Building:

- Programs that encourage American Indian and non-Native students to work and play together foster communication and healthy relationships.
- Reduced racial tensions can increase American Indian students' academic success.
- Partnerships between tribes, other governments, and non-profit organizations help ensure program sustainability.

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