**THE CENTRALITY OF NAVAJO LANGUAGE AND CULTURE**

The Navajo standards include 5 subject areas: Navajo language, culture, history, government, and Ke (character). The inclusion of these five subject areas, under the rubric of a single accountability measure, reflects the Navajo Nation's strong position that the loss of the Navajo language and culture is threat to their identity and survival as stated in the Navajo Sovereignty in Education Act of 2005:

*The Navajo Nation Diné Language Act is hereby established to ensure the preservation and education of the Navajo (Diné) language. The Navajo (Diné) language is an essential element of the life, culture, tradition and identity of the Navajo (Diné) people (Section §52)...The Navajo (Diné) language must be used to ensure the survival of the Navajo (Diné) people and their future, to maintain the Navajo way of life, and to preserve and perpetuate the Navajo Nation as a sovereign nation (Section §53).*

These sentiments, long held by the Navajo (Diné) people, are reflected in Federal law as well. The Native American Languages Act (PL 101-477, 1990) states in Section §102 that:

*'''the United States has the responsibility to act together with Native Americans to ensure the survival of these unique cultures and languages...traditional languages of native Americans are an integral part of their cultures and identities and form the basic medium for the transmission, and thus survival, of Native American cultures, literatures, histories, religions, political institutions, and values.*

More, Section §102(6) states that "there is convincing evidence that student achievement and performance, community and school pride, and educational opportunity is clearly and directly tied to respect for, and support of, the first language of the child or student." Navajo Nation wants to use the Navajo accountability plan as a way to infuse culturally relevant curriculum into the instruction of tribally-controlled schools. It is a plan akin to what the National Indian Education Association (NEIS) describes as "Culturally Based Education (CBE)”:

*CBE is more than teaching language and culture as special projects, it is a systematic approach fully incorporating and integrating specific cultural ways of thinking, learning, and problem-solving into educational practice.*

*For Native students these approaches include recognizing and utilizing Native languages as a first or second language, pedagogy that incorporates traditional cultural characteristics and involves teaching strategies that are harmonious with the Native culture knowledge and contemporary ways of knowing and learning (NEIA, 2009, August 20, p 1).*

The Navajo Sovereignty in Education Act of 2005 definition of culture includes language as well as governance, history and values:

*Culture means a set of shared patterns of behavior developed by a group of people in response to the requirements of survival. These sets include: established patterns of relationships (interpersonal and kinship) Ké; values (behavior, material possessions, individual characteristics attitudes); language; technology, acquisition and use of knowledge; planning for the future; governing structure; education; economics; and spiritual relationships. Section §3(F).*

Considerable effort and Navajo resources have already been spent toward the development of these standards. Indeed, there is a long history of schools, tribal elders and educators working together toward standards and curriculum in these areas. Diné College, a tribal college serving Navajo students throughout the reservation, has faculty and staff whose expertise is in this area. The human capital and capacity to develop these standards is available.

**CULTURALLY BASED CURRICULUM: EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS**

*NIEA believes that the integration of culture and language are critical to meeting high expectations and accountability in the education of Native students, something that is only possible when communities serving Native students have the tools and resources needed to play a meaningful role in school reform. Promoting policies and practices that support CBE is critical to fulfilling the Federal Government's responsibility in meeting the unique educational and culturally related academic needs of Native students (NEIA, 2009, August 20)*

In 2003, the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning Lab did a commissioned review of literature, for the Institute of Education Sciences, on effective standards-based practices for Native American students (Apthorp, D'Amato, & Richardson, 2003). The report's authors divided the findings into two program types: 1) Bilingual/bicultural curriculum following a primary education in Native language and culture; 2) Culturally "congruent" curriculum, or culturally-based curriculum programs.

Rough Rock Demonstration school, initiated in the mid-1960s, is cited as the first example of a Native language and culture curriculum followed by bilingualism. The Honolulu KEEP program, initiated in the 1970s, was cited as the first project fully representing the idea of a culturally congruent curriculum. The ideas developed in KEEP program soon spread to many schools in the United States, including Rough Rock Demonstration school.

The McReal review (Apthorp, D'Amato, & Richardson, 2003) of the effectiveness of such programs in improving student academic achievement is, in the words of the reviewers, mixed. However, the reviewers note, that the programs, implemented prior to the era of accountability, were not explicitly intended to improve academic performance; as much as they were also about creating jobs, developing leadership skills, and promoting cultural pride. It is not surprising, in this context that an evaluation of the effects of these programs on student achievement were mixed.

The McReal review does find literature, such as McCarty's (1993) evaluation of the Rock Point Community and Fort Defiance Elementary programs, that does suggest a significant academic impact on literacy and reading vocabulary on the California Test of Basic Skills. The Rosier & Farella study (1976, as referenced in the McReal review) compared Rough Rock and non tribally-controlled BIE schools, and found that Rough Rock students' reading scores increased at a dramatically different rate than students at the non-tribally controlled BIE schools.

William Demmert is often cited as a key reference for the idea of cultural congruence, although Demmert describes such programs as Culturally Based Education. Demmert (2003) notes that "There is a firm belief within many Native tribal communities and professional Native educators that this cultural context is absolutely essential if one is to succeed academically and to build a meaningful life as an adult (p, 1)." He argues, citing Jerome Bruner, a pioneer in cognitive development and educational psychology, that "...culture shapes mind,...it provides us with the tool kit by which we construct not only our worlds but our very conceptions of our selves and our powers...Learning, remembering, talking, imagining: all of them are made possible by participating in a culture" [Bruner J. (1996). The Culture of Education, p. x-xi].

The idea of culturally-based instruction has widespread support from many organizations, including the Nation Indian School Boards Association, the National Congress of American Indians and the National Indian Education Association. There is also a coalition of academics involved with and supportive of the idea, including David Beaulieu, University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee, John Tippeconnic, Pennsylvania State University, and Karen Swisher, President of Haskell Indian Nations University, just to name a few. The idea of culturally-based education represents a mainstream idea for Indian educators and reform of Indian education.

Demmert (2002), offers an operational definition of culturally-based education and a salient conclusion to its operation. He notes that there are six critical elements of culturally-based education:

1). Recognition and use of Native American languages.

2). Pedagogy that stresses traditional cultural characteristics, and adult-child interactions.

3). Pedagogy in which teaching strategies are congruent with the traditional culture and ways of knowing and learning.

4). Curriculum that is based on traditional culture and that recognizes the importance of Native spirituality.

5). Strong Native community participation in educating children and in the planning and operation of school activities.

6). Knowledge and use of the social and political mores of the community.