



A SHARED HISTORY

School District of Black River Falls and Ho-Chunk Nation work together to improve education and support for all students

Shelby Anderson

In 2010, leaders from the School District of Black River Falls and the Ho-Chunk Nation signed a historic memorandum of understanding (MOU). About 20 percent of the district's 1,900 students are from the Ho-Chunk Nation. The document, which is the first of its kind, clearly lays out what each entity expects from the other as they work together to educate the community's children.

"It's about meeting the needs of all students and understanding the ways those needs might be different for Ho-Chunk students," said Adrienne Thunder, executive director of education for the Ho-Chunk Nation.

The intent of the MOU is to "provide a framework for respectful and cooperative communication that utilizes consensus building for improving programs that affect

Ho-Chunk Nation tribal members."

Under the MOU, the two parties meet regularly and "agree to utilize every means necessary to resolve disputes through mutually respectful dialogue to avoid polarization, resentment, and tension." The district works closely with the Ho-Chunk Education Department and the Ho-Chunk Child and Family Services Department. District staff are trained to improve awareness and understanding of tribal protocol and culture. Day-to-day operations like transportation issues are also addressed by the MOU.

Shelly Severson, district administrator for the School District of Black River Falls, says the MOU opened up the door for collaboration between the district and the Ho-Chunk Nation.

"It's truly about systems of communication," Severson said.

The MOU has paved the way for increased communication, which has led to greater trust.





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Resolving Conflict

When the MOU was initially signed, it required monthly meetings between the district and Ho-Chunk Nation. Today, with fewer issues to resolve, they meet quarterly.

“The relationship is much more positive than it was before,” Severson said.

The idea of creating an MOU began about seven years ago when a complaint was filed against the district with the Office of Civil Rights. A group of Ho-Chunk tribal members perceived that the district wasn’t willing to discuss important topics with the tribe. They believed racism needed to be addressed, that there was

an over-representation of native student in alternative education, and that native students were being unfairly disciplined. After the complaint was placed, a representative from the Office of Civil Rights sat in on the district’s school board meetings.

Severson says the difference between the atmosphere today and seven years ago is that Ho-Chunk parents feel more comfortable coming to the district right away to resolve an issue.

Last fall, the district had an incident at the high school in which a Ho-Chunk student was offended by how a teacher handled a situation involving a conversation between students. After the student went home, she told her parents what occurred. That evening, the tribal president called the school district

asking for a meeting. In response, the district met with tribal leaders and conducted a full investigation of the situation.

“Many feel that the relationship is on a much more even footing,” Severson said. “If there is a conflict, they feel comfortable coming to us.”

Severson said another recent incident involved busing. Some Ho-Chunk parents believed the district wasn’t providing adequate busing from the Ho-Chunk Nation to the district’s schools, but the problem was quickly resolved when one of the parents contacted the district’s bus office directly. In the past, Severson said, the problem most likely would have been reported to the Ho-Chunk Education Department first and expanded into a larger, more contentious issue.

TEACHING Native American HISTORY

Teacher Paul Rykken, head of the social studies department at Black River Falls High School, shares four things to think about when teaching Native American history.

● **FOCUS.** Realize the sheer complexity of American Indian history and focus on one tribe as a microcosm of larger narratives. This will allow you to go into greater depth and will lessen confusion for students. There are multiple sources out there to help you with your own background knowledge (see *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History* by Colin Calloway or *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History* by Daniel Richter).

● **TEACH COMPETING NARRATIVES.** Get beyond “compartmentalizing” our history, particularly when it comes to including the forgotten or underrepresented parts of our past. We do a great disservice to First Nations people, African-Americans, women, or any other marginalized groups by “adding” them in token or “sidebar” fashion, as textbooks often do. A much more authentic version of our past is the story of “competing narratives,” and my experience is that students find exploring the tension compelling. History must be taught from multiple perspectives.

● **LOOK FOR “ACCESS POINTS”.** Look at your curriculum and think creatively about “access points” for American Indian history. The expression “access points” is often used in the context of discussing differentiated instruction — the idea that we find different ways to help all students access the information we are presenting. How do we take a topic that is as complex and potentially controversial as American Indian history and weave it into our curriculum? How do we do that in an authentic way that does not appear to be patronizing a particular group of people? When do we begin that process with our students? What strategies and approaches will be most effective with students at various stages in their education?

● **THINK DIFFERENTLY ABOUT TEXTUAL HISTORY.** I have always been somewhat frustrated with the lack of documents related to native voices. Part of the difficulty relates to the heavily oral tradition present in most native cultures, but also my limited view of primary sources. Be more open to other types of sources, particularly pictographs, artifacts, and other images that are rich in meaning. □



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Today, Severson said, more Ho-Chunk parents feel comfortable contacting and working with the district.

■ Collaboration

The MOU has paved the way for increased communication, which has led to greater trust. Leaders on both sides agree that the MOU is about doing what is best for all students. That was born out in the creation of an additional, new MOU. The School District of Black River Falls, the Ho-Chunk Nation, and Jackson County signed an MOU that created a “Coordinated Services Team” aimed at supporting and advocating for Ho-Chunk students who struggle with law enforcement and/or addiction issues. Funded by grants from the state, this team provides assistance to students and their families. When it comes to addiction issues for young people, providing support and treatment to the entire family is more effective than just treating the student. Thanks to the work between the district, county and nation, this level of support is now possible.

“I feel like our community really understands that we can accomplish more together than we can individually,” Severson said.

Additionally, the district works with the Ho-Chunk Nation to coordinate and provide Ho-Chunk Youth Services tutors in each school in the district. In the past, there was only one staff member who worked as a

tutor for the entire district. At the high school, three full-time teachers are Native American (two of whom are Ho-Chunk).

The district has taken an active role in training new staff on Native American culture. During in-service training, new staff members take a tour of the Ho-Chunk Nation’s buildings and have a traditional meal with Ho-Chunk elders at the tribal office building.

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The Ho-Chunk culture is on display throughout the school district. The Ho-Chunk Nation holds pow-wows in the district’s schools featuring Ho-Chunk students in traditional regalia. And, among other displays of pride, the Ho-Chunk Nation flag is placed throughout the district next to the state and U.S. flags.

■ Shared History

Black River Falls High School’s social studies department is respected for its work in teaching Native American history and culture. Paul Rykken, the head of the social studies department at Black River Falls High School, cites Colin Calloway, a historian at Dartmouth College, who says “American Indian history is American history.”

“I don’t think you can separate this story from the broader story — it’s integral,” Rykken said. “In Wisconsin, of course, its critically important due to the presence of the 11 federally recognized tribes/bands ... It’s part and parcel of who we are.”

Black River Falls’ story mirrors that of many school districts around the state that opened their doors to native students in the early 1960s. In Black River Falls, Ho-Chunk students attended the Hochungra School on the Ho-Chunk Nation’s grounds, which is about seven miles east of Black River Falls. The Hochungra School closed in 1963 as part of a general consolidation process that took place in the 1950s and 1960s that closed many “one-room” schools throughout the state. After the closure of the Hochungra School, Ho-Chunk students were bussed into Black River Falls’ schools.

As can be expected, the consolidation of the schools was a contentious time. Black River Falls public school leaders worked to educate and support native students but there were only sporadic efforts to connect the school district and the Ho-Chunk Nation. Then in 1990, with the adoption of Act 31, efforts to teach about Native American history and culture got a boost. Act 31 challenged Wisconsin educators to teach Native American history and culture as part of the standard social studies curriculum.

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In the Classroom

When ACT 31 was enacted in 1991, the social studies department at Black River Falls High School began discussions within its department and with leaders from the Ho-Chunk Nation about how to more naturally integrate American Indian history and culture into classes.

“Our guiding principle from the start was to consider what was best for all our students, particularly when it came to understanding their history,” Rykken said.

More recently, with the MOU signed in 2010, the district embraced the principles of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), which seeks to engage students by connecting to and honoring their cultures experiences, and backgrounds. As part of this effort, the district created a Committee for Culturally Respon-

sive Teaching to develop effective strategies for implementing successful approaches. Many efforts have come out of this work, including training Ho-Chunk student advocates for each grade level. In addition, the committee seeks additional ways for Native American culture and history to be integrated in all classrooms, not just social studies. As a result, the high school art department is working on a mural created by students that depicts Ho-Chunk history. In music classes at the elementary level, Ho-Chunk drummers and singers perform for students.

The district also offers specific classes that cover Ho-Chunk history, culture, and language. Black River Falls High School offers a Ho-Chunk language class taught by a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation. The school also added a Ho-Chunk and ethnic studies class in the fall of 2014. Students earn college credit

for the class via a partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay.

Thunder said she sees the work that the school district is doing to raise awareness among students of the history and sovereignty of the Ho-Chunk Nation. She said students go out to the Ho-Chunk Nation quite often and learn about culture and the “nuts and bolts” of how the nation works, including studying the tribal judicial system.

Work Continues

Severson is proud of the progress the district and nation have made together. More native students are excelling in academics, sports, and other extracurricular activities, and more Ho-Chunk parents are active in the schools than ever before. But she knows there is still work to do, in particular to address the generational trauma that still exists for older members of the Ho-Chunk





THE Student PERSPECTIVE

Black River Falls students share their take on Ho-Chunk history and culture

CODY WIESNER senior at Black River Falls High School

In school are you taught about Ho-Chunk history and/or culture?

While many history classes I have may assess Native American tribes as a whole without really focusing on a specific one, a new endeavor, the new Ho-Chunk and ethnic studies class taught at Black River Falls High School seeks to change that by chronicling the Ho-Chunk experience throughout history and their prevalence today.

Why is it important to understand the cultural and historical significance of the Ho-Chunk Nation?

The Ho-Chunk Nation makes up an important part of Wisconsin through local history and modern application. In a county where the Ho-Chunk Nation plays a prevalent role, it's important to have knowledge about it as informed citizens.

MICHAELA CUSTODIO student at Black River Falls High School and Ho-chunk Nation member

Do you think the school district honors and respects Ho-Chunk culture?

The district provides a Ho-Chunk language class taught with fluent Ho-Chunk speakers for every student, which is amazing. This year they even offered another class, Ho-Chunk and ethnic studies, which I deem extremely valuable for future generations because our history and culture will not disappear.

As a Black River Falls student, do you feel you can be proud of your heritage?

Of course, our school district is greatly diverse! Native American students make up 20 percent of our student population. It's pretty cool to be represented by this many, especially because the number keeps growing and growing. I'm fortunate to be surrounded by others that are also so culturally entwined. So yes, as a student at Black River Falls High School, I feel proud to be a part of the Ho-Chunk Nation. □

Nation — many of whom are grandparents of students.

“Some of our students are being raised by their grandparents,” Severson said. “These grandparents were in the generation that were removed from their homes as children and put into boarding schools.”

The MOU is up for renewal and Severson said both sides are supportive of signing on and continuing to work together. According to Thunder, there are still issues that arise between the two groups, but, with open lines of communication, it's more likely issues will be resolved efficiently and fairly.

“It's a reminder that the work continues,” Thunder said. “We don't want to get too comfortable. It's a continuing process.” ■

Shelby Anderson is editor of Wisconsin School News.

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