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# **NATIVE-AMERICAN INITIATIVE**

**BY LAURA KAYE JAGLES**

**WHEN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS  
EMBRACE NATIVE-AMERICAN  
CULTURE, WE ALL BENEFIT**



In 2014, only 0.3 percent of the NAIS-member school population was Native American. In some regions of the country, no Native-American students were enrolled in independent schools. Given that Native Americans make up 2 percent of the total U.S. population and that Native tribes exist in every region, these statistics raise a question: Why aren't more Native-American students attending independent schools?

Five hundred sixty-seven tribal nations are currently listed in the Federal Register.<sup>1</sup> On the Bureau of Indian Affairs website, a regional search of tribes is easily made by clicking on the map of the United States. It doesn't take much effort to learn which tribes are within reach of your school. So perhaps the better question is: Why aren't independent schools seeking out more Native-American students?

A successful initiative between independent schools and tribes in the Santa Fe, New Mexico, area over the course of the past decade suggests that independent schools can make a difference in the lives of Native-American children. It also makes it clear that having more Native Americans in an independent school can be highly beneficial to the school and its overall culture.



## THE SANTA FE STORY

New Mexico is home to 22 different tribal nations. Of these, 19 identify as Pueblo tribes. The term “Pueblo” is Spanish for a group of people in communal dwellings organized by indigenous inhabitants. These Native-American “Pueblos,” of course, were long-established towns and villages when the Spanish first arrived in the “new world,” and each had a specific name in its respective language. Over time, the 19 tribes remaining in the Rio Grande area became known collectively as the Pueblo people or 19 Pueblos.

One of these Pueblos — the Pueblo of Pojoaque (P’osuwaegh: “Water Gathering Place” or “Drinking Water Place”) — is located 10 miles north of Santa Fe. A decade ago, in an effort to provide additional educational opportunities for tribal members, the Pueblo of Pojoaque began enrolling tribal children in independent schools in Santa Fe. First, they collaborated with one independent school, Santa Fe Preparatory School, learning the school culture and ways to support their students within that school setting. For its part, the school learned a variety of ways to support the tribal community and embrace the students within the school community. Several years of building relationships among the tribe, school, and families made this partnership successful.

In 2010, however, the relationship began to bloom into something bigger. In an effort to pilot a “learner-driven curriculum” that could be used by tribal nations throughout the United States, the Indigenous Language Institute (ILI) collaborated with the Pojoaque Pueblo and Santa Fe Prep. The ILI chose the school because of its effective relationship with Pueblo of Pojoaque.

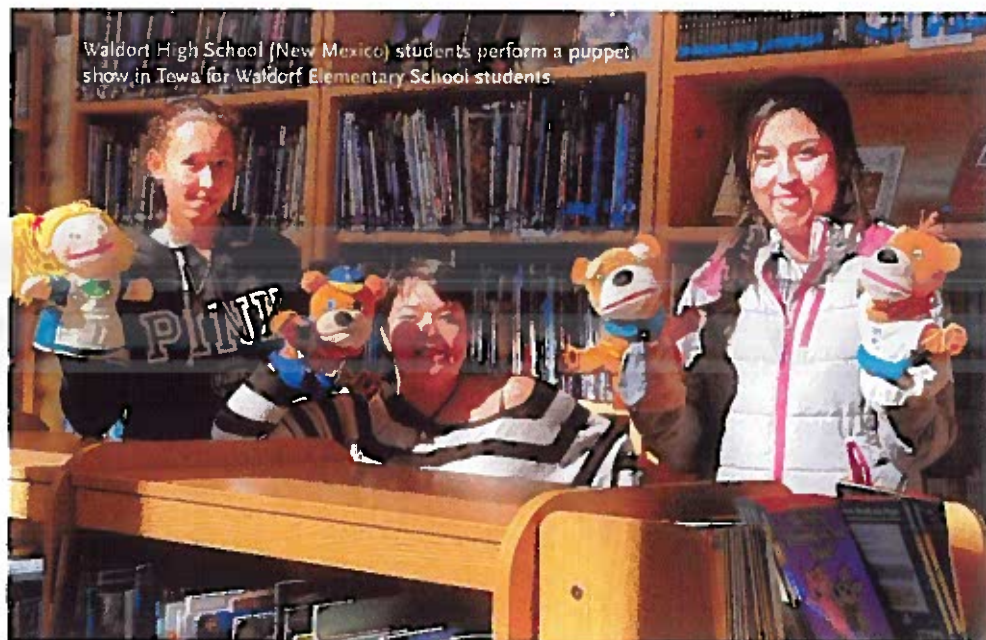
At the time of the pilot program, I was teaching seventh-grade Southwest Literature at Santa Fe Prep. I made the

shift to take part in this new initiative when the five students in the Native Language Pilot Project needed a mentor in the Tewa language, a language spoken by six Pueblos north of Santa Fe. Because my tribe, Tesuque Pueblo, speaks Tewa, the students asked me to serve as their mentor. Although the ILI’s intent was to explore the use of the curriculum for a number of Native languages, Tewa became the primary focus since participating Santa Fe Prep students were from the tribes of Pojoaque Pueblo, Santa Clara Pueblo, and San Juan Pueblo, all of which speak Tewa.

It took a while to figure out how

wanted to learn to say in Tewa. In particular, they were interested in learning how to speak with elders, grandparents, and those who still speak the language. They also wanted to learn how to say, “She’s beautiful,” “What’s up?” and other teenage vernacular.

Ultimately, what the students discovered was that the language strengthened their bonds to their culture even more than their participation in dances and other community events. Learning Tewa helped them comprehend certain aspects of their tribal culture that they wouldn’t otherwise understand. What they also discovered — and what made the program so valuable — was that



Waldorf High School (New Mexico) students perform a puppet show in Tewa for Waldorf Elementary School students.

this program would work. How many hours during the week did students require to fulfill a language credit? Where would we meet if our schedules did not coincide? How would the sessions be documented? How would the students’ progress be assessed? But after several meetings with ILI, Santa Fe Prep, and Pojoaque Pueblo’s education director, we were set to begin sessions during lunch, after school, and on weekends.

While the curriculum offered a variety of themes — such as Survival Phrases, Food, Travel, and Kinship — the students determined what they

they were developing a more complete sense of self. While acquiring an excellent education in an independent school setting, they could now also fully embrace their tribal identity.

Serendipitously, an aspiring documentary filmmaker, Aimee Barry Broustra, expressed interest in the project. Broustra had recently enrolled her son in the upper school at Santa Fe Prep and saw the need to document the progress of the five Pueblo students in the program. *The Young Ancestors*<sup>2</sup> documentary was the result. As the producer and director, Broustra came to understand that learning one’s tribal

language is crucial to forming one's identity. She also came to understand that non-Native Americans — including filmmakers and educators — could play an important role in supporting this essential work.

"Many people who consider themselves educated, unfortunately have limited and erroneous ideas about Native Americans and their experience today," Brousta says. "Native Americans are courageously working to maintain their language and culture in a society that does not fully understand the significance of tribal identity.... In our current climate of working to support cultural diversity, Native Americans should not be forgotten."

### THE PROGRAM GROWS

After a few years of witnessing the Native Language Pilot Project's success, Pojoaque Pueblo's Education Director Felicia Rivera approached me. She was interested in bringing the Tewa Language Program into the private schools where Pojoaque Pueblo was now sending more than a dozen students. These schools included Santa Fe Preparatory School, Rio Grande School, Desert Montessori, and Santa Fe Waldorf High School — all in Santa Fe. Rivera approached the schools about creating a partnership to provide classroom space, introduce me to the other schools as a Tewa language instructor, and discuss ways the students would benefit.

By the 2012-13 school year, I was the Tewa language instructor for the group of private schools in Santa Fe, funded by the State of New Mexico's "Sustaining Tribal Languages Grant" and the Pueblo of Pojoaque. I also had classroom support and partnership of participating schools, which grew to include, in addition to the initial four schools, the May Learning Center, Mariposa Montessori, and Santa Fe Waldorf Elementary School.

It is safe to say that the expanded Tewa Language Program improved the overall experience of Pueblo students in the schools and created a strong sense of community between the Pueblo people and the independent schools,

as well as among the collaborating schools. The schools witnessed the positive shift of Pueblo students gaining a stronger sense of cultural identity as a result of learning their Tewa language in a supportive environment.

### LESSONS FOR ALL SCHOOLS

In the last two years, independent schools in Santa Fe, thanks to determined leadership within the schools, have made meaningful progress in increasing and improving their support of Native-American students. At Rio Grande School, Head of School Nigel Taplin and Learning Support Coordinator Kerri Cottle discovered countless ways to support current K-6 Native-American students. At Santa Fe Prep, Head of School Jim Leonard and Claire Romero, learning

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specialist and director of multicultural life, have made equally meaningful strides to support Native-American students in grades 7 to 12. Together, the two schools have offered a valuable K-12 educational experience for the students. Here's a sample of the collaboration:

**Tewa Language Instruction:** Kerri Cottle and I are in constant communication. We meet early in the year to coordinate class schedules with my schedule, find locations for Tewa sessions, and plan an annual Tewa

Program. Cottle is also the liaison between the students' teachers and me, if I need to communicate with them between sessions. At Santa Fe Prep, I am in communication with Claire Romero, as well as the heads of the middle school and upper schools.

**Start-of-the-Year In-Service:** The Rio Grande School in-service was held last year at the Pueblo of Pojoaque's La Mesita property for the school's faculty. The facility is a tribal property located on ancestral homelands and owned by all tribal members. It was a great way to introduce all faculty members to the tribe — and for the Rio Grande tribal students to see the teachers take an interest in their culture.

**Values Activity:** Rio Grande faculty and staff were also asked to briefly describe ways they value family, friends, culture, and community. Afterward, their values were compared with those of the Pueblo students — as a way to improve cross-cultural understanding and to help the adults in school offer the students better support.

**Reflection on Journey:** Pojoaque Pueblo students commute on a 20-minute shuttle from the pueblo property, which includes La Mesita, to various schools in Santa Fe. Rio Grande faculty experienced this journey by riding the shuttle to La Mesita, for the in-service program. Afterward, they were asked to recall what they saw, then close their eyes and imagine what K-6 graders might experience on this shuttle ride. Is it easy for them to leave the comfort of their community? Might they be able to have a parent swing by the school if they forgot something or left their homework at home? What are the advantages/disadvantages of having such a commute? How might we better serve the students, families, and community with this new knowledge?

**Class Coffee at the Poeh Center:** The Poeh Center is a museum and cultural arts center for reviving and

sustaining traditional Pueblo pottery, sculpting, silversmithing, and other crafts. The goal of this Class Coffee is to give Pojoaque parents and the center's educational director and codirector the ability to participate in a dialogue about Rio Grande School. Nigel Taplin and Kerri Cottle discussed with parents the school's recent accreditation process and how the school can support their families.<sup>3</sup> Joe Talachy, the current Pojoaque Governor and a Rio Grande/Santa Fe Prep parent, shared details of tribal history. During the conversation, Talachy invited Taplin and Cottle to attend a tribal Branch Counsel Meeting to talk about the Rio Grande School educational option for tribal members.

**Attending Pueblo of Pojoaque or Tesuque Pueblo Feast Days:** The Pueblos annually extend invitations to both Rio Grande and Santa Fe Prep School staff and students to attend tribal dances open to the public in November for Tesuque or December for Pojoaque. Staff and students attend when arrangements can be made and when the day coincides with the school calendar.

**Visits to Pueblo of Pojoaque Tutoring Center:** Cottle and/or additional faculty visit the center monthly, which ensures homework expectations are met and consistency among school, home, and student is maintained. Rio Grande and Santa Fe Prep leave resources and materials available at the center for students. The center is open Monday through Thursday free of charge to Pueblo members.

**Back-to-School Night:** All parents at Rio Grande are invited to learn more about co-curricular programs, including the Tewa Language Program and Values Activity.

**Rio Grande and Santa Fe Prep Tuition Partnership and Agreement with the Pueblo of Pojoaque:** Financial assistance for qualifying families is available at both schools. Specifically, the David Ginocchio

Scholarship provides financial aid for Native-American students and, secondarily, for students from other underrepresented groups attending Santa Fe Prep.

**Sharing Local Culture:** Throughout the year, a variety of activities occur at both schools. The Rio Grande School kindergarten class visits a neighboring Pueblo community of Taytsugeh Owingeh (Cottonwood Tree Place), where a fellow classmate resides. The Pojoaque Pueblo Hoop Dance Group, which has traveled to Washington, DC, Italy, and France to perform, comes to Rio Grande and Santa Fe Prep for a performance and conversation.

**Native-American Heritage Month:** During November, Santa Fe Prep introduced several activities related to Native cultures, including a Native Arts Night. The Tesuque Pueblo's Next Generation Dancers performed a traditional Pueblo dance for students and their grandparents on Grandparents Day. A question box was made available on Santa Fe Prep's campus for folks to insert questions they had about Native-American people and cultures. Native students or staff addressed the questions and offered answers during school assemblies throughout the month.

## EXPANDING ACCESS

By affirming Pueblo tribal culture, tradition, values, language, sense of identity, and place, the independent schools in Santa Fe are learning to both broaden their own horizons and cultures while helping to serve the regional tribes. The significant numbers of Native-American students and families on Rio Grande and Santa Fe Prep's campuses, in particular, have enhanced the fabric of the independent school community and the form of education all students receive.

We have done the *hard* work and continue to do the *heart* work. Collectively, we will continue to build relationships with Pueblos, students, families, schools, faculty, and staff, growing

and learning from one another while all our students learn to value the Pueblo cultures that have thrived for centuries.

We also hope that more independent schools around the country will reach out to Native-American tribes in their region. The work has been highly rewarding — and certainly fits the mission of independent schools, especially those that believe in the value of diversity and in serving a larger public good.

At the 2015 NAIS People of Color Conference, Native-American writer and keynote speaker, Gyasi Ross, expressed his joy in seeing such a diverse group of educators and students. But, he was sad to note the small number of Native Americans among them. As a Native-American educator working in an independent school, I understand that sadness. But I also see it as an opportunity. As independent schools continue to push for greater access, equity, and inclusion, I encourage them to think about ways to connect with regional Native-American tribes.

As with all outreach efforts, it takes time and energy. But the payoff is more than worth it. Not only are you helping young people who can benefit from an independent education, but you are also supporting some of the oldest cultures in the world while transforming your own schools into true 21st century institutions.

*Laura Kaye Jagles is a member of Tesuque Pueblo, New Mexico. She is also affiliated with the Western Shoshone and Paiute tribes. She's taught at the Native American Preparatory School, at the Santa Fe Preparatory School, and now serves the Pueblo of Pojoaque as a Tewa language instructor to 34 Pueblo students attending several schools in Santa Fe, New Mexico.*

## Notes

1. More information on Native American tribes is available at [www.bia.gov/WhoWeAre/BIA/OIS/TribalGovernmentServices/TribalDirectory/](http://www.bia.gov/WhoWeAre/BIA/OIS/TribalGovernmentServices/TribalDirectory/).
2. For details and a film trailer, see [www.theyoungancestors.com](http://www.theyoungancestors.com).
3. For more about Rio Grande School's diversity efforts, see [www.riograndeschool.org/apps/video/watch.jsp?v=84853](http://www.riograndeschool.org/apps/video/watch.jsp?v=84853).