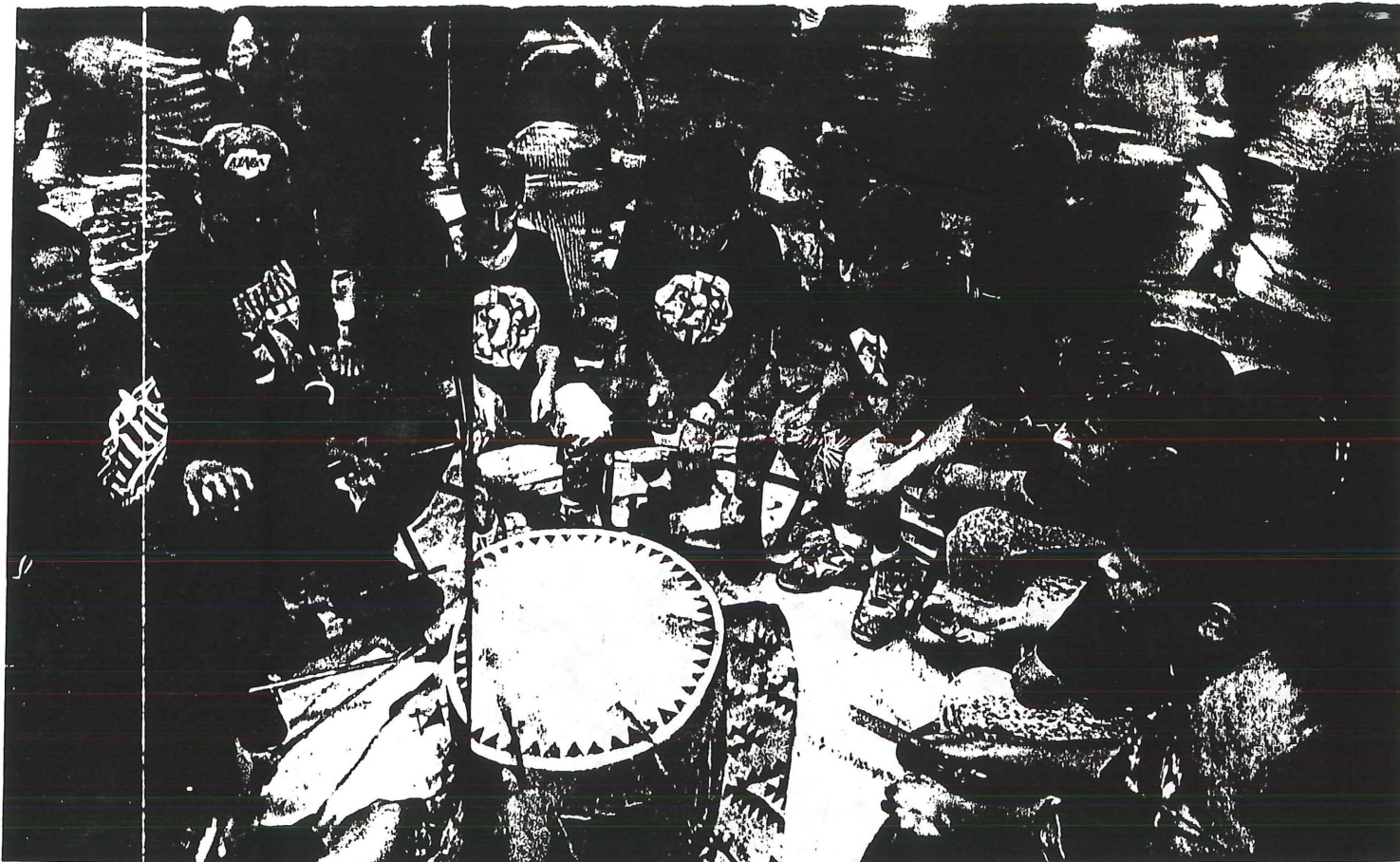
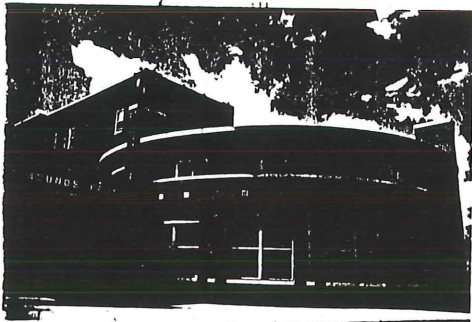


A FAMILY OF LEARNERS AND STORYTELLERS



The American Indian Magnet School

STORY BY CORNEL PEWEWARDY AND MARY BUSHHEY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE HABERMANN

Indian education has always been experiential and holistic, seen as preparing the young to be productive and powerful citizens of the world in which they live.

The American Indian Magnet School, in the Saint Paul, Minnesota public school district, offers this kind of holistic education for the individual growth and nurturing of all its students. An important reason for students to attend an American Indian magnet school is the intrinsic interest—Indian cultures provide a rich and varied tapestry of approaches to life. Ancient tribal cultures possess a myriad of myths and tales that are culturally

diverse. The American Indian Magnet school is conveying to students a network of values, norms, rituals, roles, heroes and heroines, ceremonies, personal anecdotes, stories, and myths. The school attracts students, staff, and volunteers who do more than emphasize a Native American philosophy, we espouse it and live it. We do so for the betterment of our children, ourselves, and our world—one world.

The students attending our school are "high-needs" children. They come from varied backgrounds and have often moved frequently from school to school without much taste of success. The

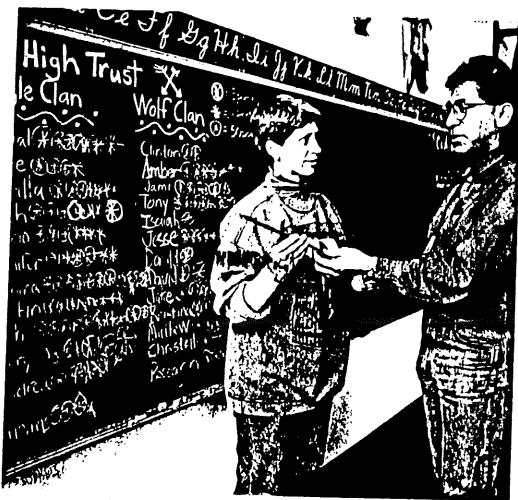
Indian and non-Indian students seek out the American Indian Magnet School because Native American culture and philosophy are not only taught, their values permeate all aspects of the school's approach to education.

problems our children face in and out of the classroom—racism, poverty, language differences, and cultural barriers—are not adequately addressed in today's typical public schools. These factors have, at the least, contributed to serious doubts of their own self worth and capabilities, and at the worst, left deep emotional scars.

For Native American students who have only

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The school's principal, Dr. Cornel Pewewardy, presents a symbolic arrow to fourth-grade teacher Diane Kastner. A bundle of arrows, representing our strength when we are united, had been specially commissioned and had been blessed by Carpio Bernal, a Taos Pueblo elder.

loose connections to their tribal roots, Indian identity, and language, public schools lack culturally responsive and relevant curricula. Most Indian students in the United States attend public schools, but achievement levels of Indian students continue to lag far behind their potential. American Indian unemployment today stands at nearly 50 percent. Approximately 25 percent of all Indian children are separated from their immediate families and live in foster homes, adoptive homes, or institutions. Indian student dropout rates, self-hatred, and suicide rates far exceed that of the national average. Lack of student motivation can be traced, in part, to the feelings of disgrace and humiliation they suffer from their continual confrontation with stereotypical thinking about Indian people.

Because of our strong commitment to an "extended family" approach at the American Indian Magnet School, students begin to feel a sense of belonging. Older siblings or cousins are often seen visiting with younger children at lunch or in the hallways; upper grades are involved in learning experiences with the primary students; teachers

take the time to listen, talk, and touch their students as needed. We know that we are contributing to the development of not just a first grader or a sixth grader, but an individual—a person who represents the future.

Saint Paul's American Indian Magnet School is the first magnet school of its kind in Minnesota and the second in the entire nation—initiating "placing education into culture" rather than continuing the practice of placing culture into education. Students from kindergarten to eighth grade study the rich history, culture and heritage, and contributions of the Native American with emphasis on the Ojibwe, Dakota and Lakota, and Winnebago tribes.

The magnet school concept is not new. Magnet schools are designed to meet particular needs and interests of students and parents, working like magnets to attract voluntary student enrollment. At ours, it is the school's philosophy—the Native American world view—which makes the American Indian Magnet School a sought-after learning environment for all those who attend, Native and non-Native. This world view stresses respect for elders; the importance of family; the values of giving and sharing; and living in balance and harmony with oneself, animals, and all nature.

In Native American philosophy and thought, "medicine" is a vital energy source that we draw upon and use for direction and for wholeness. Holistic education equates to responsibility for the whole universe: We are all related—*Mitakuye oyasin*. This Lakota saying speaks of our interdependence upon one another and is whispered in supplication or prayer: "Understand me and help me, all my relatives."

The circle is a sacred symbol of life and its interdependence. Sections within a medicine wheel circle are all connected to each other, and what happens to one section affects the others. The circle is a key symbol in Native American spirituality, family structure, gatherings of people, meetings, songs, and dances. Native American symbolism is used in the architectural design of our school, which incorporates a new 16,000-square-foot addition to a 1924 school building that had been vacant for nearly a decade. Origin myths helped to teach the architects and builders many methods in collecting building materials, good construction techniques, and blessing the finished building. Sometimes a myth was recited before construction began.

The significance of the circle dictated the design of our large, circular All-Nations Room as it was

constructed and painted. It also regulated each phase of construction, described the prayers that were uttered, and dictated how the room (its doors, four brick pillars, multicolored tiles, and four-pointed wooden cross in the ceiling) were to be aligned with the four cardinal directions. By retaining certain key details of the existing school, the renovation and addition provides continuity between past and present, a major emphasis of the educational philosophy of the school. It is a place for "high touch" as well as "high tech." The All-Nations Room is a special place where we connect persons to each other and to technology in a culturally responsible way.

It is 2:30 on a November Friday afternoon. Students are gathered outside for the planting of a maple tree. This tree symbolizes the learning and growth which will take place for each student throughout the year. A drum group is in attendance. Prayers, along with cedar, sage, and sweet grass smoke, are offered for the health and

strength of not only the tree, but the entire school population. As the tree is about to be lowered into the earth, someone notices an eagle soaring high above the school grounds. All eyes look skyward in appreciation of this fitting tribute to the strength and beauty of what we are planting and nurturing in our school.)

This is one story of Circle Time at the American Indian Magnet School. We schedule Circle Time every Monday morning and Friday afternoon. During this cultural activity, everyone gathers together to greet each other and share special programs. Because each class has the opportunity to present a program or skit of a cultural nature, Circle Time becomes an extension of classroom learning. It is a shining example of peer teaching, cross-age grouping, and cooperative learning. Circle time is also a family time: young students may be seen holding hands or cuddling near their teacher, older siblings, or cousins; often, other family members of students drop in to listen. These



Our first year is only a preview of the educational success that we can and must achieve. The gateway to a better life for us, as for all Americans, has always been education. Our family of learners looks to elders for knowledge as we establish a culturally relevant curriculum that prepares us for the future. UPPER LEFT The school's All-Nations Room. UPPER RIGHT Team teaching and cross-age grouping of students capitalizes on the strengths of teachers and students alike. LOWER LEFT Students using the computer laboratory.





gatherings are part of our "family of learners" concept. When not held outdoors, they take place in our specially-designed All-Nations Room.

Our classrooms are self-contained in "family-style" rooms, linked to another class by connecting doors. Team teaching and cross-age grouping of students capitalizes on the strengths of teachers and students alike. These flexible approaches ensure the highest degree of social and academic success with the least frustration possible. Whole language instruction, utilizing a wide variety of multicultural literature, is employed across the curriculum to strengthen the thinking and communication skills of all students. Competition between students is de-emphasized. Letter grades are not used; instead, evaluation is based on student portfolios and parent-teacher meetings at the beginning of the school year, during which goals are set. Our students achieve because Native American sports, games, music, and crafts are incorporated across the curriculum, and learning is relevant to the students' knowledge base and culture.

Significant aspects of the instructional environ-

A maple tree is planted, symbolizing the learning and growth which will take place for each student throughout the year. Prayers, along with cedar, sage, and sweet grass smoke, are offered for the health and strength of not only the tree, but the entire school population. Dr. Pewewardy points to an eagle hovering over the learning tree ceremony.

ment of our school include the absence of bells and clocks. Each teacher has the flexibility to establish and alter his or her instructional schedule to address the specific needs of the students.

Elders teach children stories as they were once told by their grandparents. With the assistance of local tribal drum groups, children are taught Indian songs and dances.

We look to the elders for knowledge today in order to survive tomorrow. The gateway to a better life for us, as for all Americans, has always been education. Our faith in its power remains strong. If we remain enslaved in the past, we remain guilt-ridden. Our need is to be free and to act responsibly with a culturally relevant curriculum that prepares all students for the future.

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