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**Education is American Indian power
'There is hope in the future'**

by: Ron Selden / Indian Country Today

BILLINGS, Mont. -- Howard Rainer says many people call him a brown Ann Landers. But instead of just dispensing advice like the legendary newspaper columnist, the 57-year-old director of Native American Educational Outreach programs at Utah's Brigham Young University also gives American Indian youth a collective kick in the pants.

Rainer, a poet, photographer and nationally known motivational speaker, brought his lively presentations to the recent **National Indian Education Association** (NIEA) convention in Billings, where he urged Native students and teachers to excel.

The convention was attended by dozens of top educators and government officials from across the country. Many of its aspects focused on how to keep American Indians in school and improve their academic performance. Rainer did his part by boosting morale and making participants feel good about themselves.

"Native Americans are either ugly or beautiful," he told one workshop crowd. "What do you want to be?"

"Beautiful! " participants roared back in unison.

Nationally, American Indian high school students still have drop-out rates typically double or triple those of non-Indians. Montana Office of Public Instruction figures show more than 19 percent of enrolled American Indian students in the state left high school during the 1996-97 academic year, one of the worst years in recent decades. Numbers show many of their brethren had dropped out in middle school.

"Graduation rates at Montana reservation high schools are too low," said Montana Superintendent of Schools Linda McCulloch. "We must do better."

Rainer, among others, contends that low self-esteem and self-confidence carry much of the blame. Boosting these basic building blocks of success is the responsibility of everyone in Indian country.

"We cannot tell Indian people to be proud if we're not," Rainer said. "We have to start telling our Indian people we are intelligent. We are beautiful. It's time for us to be seen, be heard, be respected, and it starts with you."

Rainer spent much of his time picking individuals out of the room, asking who they are and what they do. After each testimony, he prompted participants to applaud the accomplishments. Many got standing ovations. And when one young student who is raising all her siblings while struggling to stay in school broke down crying, Rainer suggested a scholarship fund be started for her on the spot.

Participants, most of them strangers, responded immediately by donating an ankle-high pile of cash to her cause.

"There is hope in the future," Rainer said, prancing around at times with his hands flailing and pointing. "Education is Indian power. When Indian people want to do something, give them the tools. Don't put red tape and BIA tape in front of them. Get behind them!"

Many other participants told of hardship and pain. But Rainer told them Indian people can't spend time feeling sorry for themselves.

"Check out the graveyards. Check out the dates, when they were born, when they died. These are the things that test our mettle. Hang around with positive people. Discourage whiners and complainers. We are on an urgent mission. Our kids need us now. Just help one!"

Rainer's models for empowerment are timely. While many educational indicators show marked improvement for Indian students across the nation, others -- particularly reading skills and retention rates -- remain in the basement.

Susan Neuman, the U.S. Department of Education's undersecretary for elementary-level programs, told several thousand convention participants many endeavors boost test scores and keep Indian youngsters in school clearly have failed.

"Despite all our efforts, our children are not succeeding. We know the answer is not pouring more money, more money, more money into the system."

Instead, educators must rethink their priorities, teach more cognitive thinking skills, and stick with methods that are proven, not just those that sound good.

"We know how to teach young children," Neuman said, adding that cultural ethnicity and poverty don't in themselves make poor students. "We just don't do it enough."

She said many teachers blame families for their students' failures. But the real culprit may in fact be teachers and administrators, especially those who stick with worn-out classroom routines that simply consume hours rather than mold scholars.

"Don't blame the family. Don't blame others. When I go to the doctor with a cold, he doesn't blame my mother. Teach the child starting now."

Neuman said one is that too many teachers rely on commercial vendors to tell them what should be taught and how it should be presented. Another challenge is that the youngest students -- the ones who most need a steady tiller while being introduced to education -- often end up with the most inexperienced teachers.

And then there's the constantly shifting sands of national and local academic policy, which prompts additional instability in public school systems.

"In God we trust, in all others we need data," she said of her department's informal motto about curriculum. "Children can learn to make a paper pumpkin, but that's not really important. We need to teach them the skills that will get them through life."

A main way to improve retention is for Indian children to embrace their Native languages, added Darrell Robes Kipp, co-founder of the Piegan Institute's Blackfoot Reservation language immersion schools. Otherwise, American Indians will continue to turn into a faceless conglomeration of everyone else.

"We had the full-court press put on us for about 150 years," Kipp, a Harvard-educated administrator, told the convention crowd. "But we're still here. We're back."

Kipp maintained that tribal educators must become leaders in retaining Native languages, which have nearly been extinguished. Government policy, boarding schools and religious do-gooders almost silenced the Native tongue, he said, and many of this generation's parents and grandparents decided to spare their children the pain of being fluent.

"They didn't pass it down to us because they loved us. They didn't want us to be abused."

Kipp, Blackfeet, said he boycotted American Indian education conferences for years because they didn't support Native language programs. Now, he said it is heartwarming to hear so many participants speak in their own dialects and to increasingly see language workshops in the agendas.

"You don't have to ask permission to speak your language," he said, adding educators must take it upon themselves to ensure their tribal customs don't go extinct.

"Don't go to the school board to ask if you can go to the basement and teach 15 minutes of your language each day. We need to fill the air with the sound of our language. I tell people, 'If you can't help, then get the hell out of the way.'"

Kipp, who with colleagues raised \$3.8 million in private funding for their schools in the last five years, took aim at those who say Indian languages are unneeded now and are too difficult to comprehend.

"Everyone says Chinese is the hardest language to learn, but how come 4 billion speak it?" he asked. "Five hundred years they've been kicking the language out of us. But the past is over with. We've got to go on."

Carol Schneider, a teacher at the Four Winds High School in Devils Lake, N.D., said putting a practical spin on cultural teachings helps students have fun learning about their past, even if much of it is tragic.

For example, a classroom project about bison can take on many angles, and the story of their near extinction can be woven into vignettes about the scores of ways Native peoples utilized and worshipped the creature since its inception, she said. One handy tool is the "buffalo box" distributed by the South Dakota-based Intertribal Bison Cooperative. The fur-covered container, especially designed for classrooms, contains everything from bladder canteens to hair rope and bone hair adornments.

"It's important to know our old ways and go back to them," Fort Peck Reservation elder Bessie Reddog said during a workshop on traditional sacred laws. "I wish I had paid more attention to my grandmother, but I didn't."

But Laura Ricker, a member of Michigan's Little River Band of Ottawa, said that the non-Indian focus on personal academic performance is a foreign concept to many traditional American Indians, which makes the situation more difficult.

"We didn't believe like that," she explained. "We combined our strengths together as a tribe."

"It's hard to stand in a society where we have to find a place," added Shari Daniels, who teaches at a Head Start program. "We shouldn't have to do that."

Linda Pease-Bell, director of the Native American Development Corp., and a key organizer of the five-day event, noted that the convention and the recent Indian National Finals Rodeo in Billings pumped as much as \$400,000 a day into the area's economy. Next year's NIEA convention will be held in Albuquerque, N.M.