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Tribe Fears Loss of Culture Through Mandated School Standardization

By Michael Jamison of the Missoulian

Kelly Little Dog gives his son Justin, 6, a hug as the youngster heads to school in Browning on the Blackfoot Reservation earlier this month. Schools in Indian Country, like many schools in Montana, are finding it difficult to achieve the standards required in the No Child Left Behind Act.

Photo by Michael Gallacher/Missoulian



BROWNING - A hard, cold wind hummed unchecked through the big empty, hammering across a rolling ocean of midwinter brown and nagging at the hem of Justin Little Dog's jacket.

The 6-year-old gave his dad a hug, and turned out of the early morning frost to board the school bus. His bus stop, located along a lonely strip of pavement on Montana's Blackfoot Indian Reservation, is just this side of the middle of nowhere, a rural outpost marked by big horizons and stark drifts of month-old snow.

"Be good," his dad called into the wind.

Justin waved, and the bus pulled away, toward Browning, toward an all too common reservation town where unemployment can hit 85 percent in the winter months and more than a third of the townsfolk live below the poverty line. It's a place where, by some estimates, adult alcoholism can top 70 percent, and where three of every four homes is a single-parent household.

Passing those households, where metal roofs are pinned down against the wind by stacks of bald tires, Justin's bus threaded its way toward the school. If he makes it to high school, which is no sure bet in these parts, young Little Dog will enter classrooms where more than 40 percent drop out before graduation.

"He'll be lucky if he makes it," said Darrel Kipp. "Our children have already been left behind."

Kipp is one who made it, growing up in Browning and graduating and leaving and finally coming back home with a master's degree from Harvard. Today, he runs a private, nonprofit school where 30 kids from kindergarten through eighth grade are taught in the ancestral Blackfoot tongue.

His school, which began in 1994, has no administrators, no superintendents, no boards and no

chairmen and no principal. Most notably, it has no standardized tests. "Standardized tests are great for standard kids," Kipp said. "But our kids aren't standard kids. They don't live in standard American homes."

Standardized tests, as required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act, fail Browning's students, he said, rather than the other way around.

The act requires states to craft standard tests for all schools, and schools must score high enough to clear the federal bar. If they fail, they are put on 'improvement.' (Browning schools have been on improvement since the act took effect.) If they fail consistently, the schools can lose their federal funding. In fact, the entire state system could lose its funding.

Educators in Indian Country, people like Kipp, worry that children who are culturally distant from the "standard" are at a disadvantage when taking the tests. Although the kids are as smart as their "standard" peers, they might not share the same fundamental knowledge base, or so the theory goes.

Take, for example, the lesson of the awning.

Shiela Rutherford is the eighth-grade counselor at Browning Middle School, where kids have been practicing this winter for the upcoming state tests.

She couldn't help but notice that nearly all her students missed the vocabulary question about the word "awning."

"Of course they missed it," Rutherford said. "This is Browning. Nobody has an awning. The wind blows 70 miles per hour."

The last awning seen in Browning, she joked, was flapping its way toward Ohio. It was the same story with the question about the "babbling brook."

"Our students come from a totally different background," said Mary Johnson, superintendent of Browning Public Schools. "They speak English, but it's not the English of Iowa."

Robert Rides-At-The-Door, a member of the Browning School Board, believes the new tests should have the flexibility to reflect "regionalized English."

"Someone from Illinois who creates a test to measure how English-effective you are, he doesn't understand English on the reservation," Rides-At-The-Door said. Nor does he understand the English of New England or the South, not to mention the English of the barrio and the 'hood.

And if Blackfeet English is not the English of Iowa, nor is Blackfeet science the science of Iowa.

Walk the crowded and noisy aisles of the Browning Middle School science fair and you find an inordinate number of studies into the effects of fetal alcohol syndrome, the impacts of methamphetamine use, the power of ancient medicines distilled from native plants.

And then there's Kourtnie Gopher's science project, which looked like a lesson in history.

But it wasn't, and therein lies the rub. Gopher's project was an exercise in the present, a

scientific exploration of current events in her community.

It was good science, all about heat transfer and relative energy loss. But you can bet that when it comes time to take the annual standardized tests at Browning Middle School, there will be no questions about whether you'll stay cozier in a tepee, a long house, a kiva or a sweat lodge.

Perhaps, Rutherford suggests, the tests should ask about pemmican rather than awnings. But then, of course, the kids in Iowa might not do so well on that question, she adds.

"It's frustrating," said Superintendent Johnson. "Should there be something in these tests about us, too?"

Johnson is quick to tell you she's no opponent of the "basic premise" behind the No Child Left Behind Act. "Traditionally, Indian children have been left behind by mainstream American education," she said.

But, she wonders, is the solution to make the mainstream even more mainstream? Kipp doesn't think so. "I think the public schools are faced with a dilemma," he said. "They are being presented with more bureaucracy, when the truth is less bureaucracy is the answer."

Johnson tends to agree.

"I don't mind being held accountable as an educator," she said. "Public schools should be held accountable, no matter where they are. But I would like the luxury of doing things a little bit differently, to reflect who we are and what we know. The people who wrote this act want everybody to be the same; but the fact is, we're not all the same."

"Not the same at all," Kipp insists. He calls No Child Left Behind a "major assimilation policy," and Johnson doesn't argue.

The assimilation years still are fresh in the collective memory of Indian Country; they were the decades when the federal government gave up trying to defeat Indians militarily and instead tried to "whitewash" the reservations.

The idea, Kipp said, was to dissolve Indian culture out of Indians, stirring centuries of cultural diversity into the homogeneity of the melting pot. The new school testing requirements, he said, do much the same, assimilating not just Indians but also Asian Americans and black Americans and Hispanic Americans.

The loss of diversity in the classroom, he said, finally harms not just Indian culture, but also Indian education.

Which is exactly why Kipp's private school teaches in the Blackfeet language, and why its graduates are leading their public high school classes.

"In English," Kipp said, "you have taken a very beautiful word and bastardized it. It's the word 'equality.' 'Equality' by itself is a very strong and beautiful word, but it has been changed to mean 'sameness,' or 'uniformity.' It's about control. The more uniform a thing is, the easier it is to control. Standardized testing focuses on conformity. In doing so, they take away the ingenuity that comes with diversity, and the result is totalitarianism."

Kipp defines totalitarianism as an attempt from on high to "decide who deserves to get what."

"If you go the other way, away from totalitarianism," he said, "then you enliven diversity, and diversity is where creativity comes from. Sameness produces dullness. Diversity produces vibrancy and life. That's why we need true equality - education that's equal, but different."

The emphasis on diversity has, in fact, been showing signs of success in Browning Schools, Johnson said, and she hopes not to lose it now that teachers are "teaching to the test" (she calls it "standards-based education") in preparation for new requirements.

"The things that work, in terms of strategies to improve mainstream education, don't always translate well here," she said.

In recent years, she said, the biggest improvements have come from school district efforts to move away from standardized education, not toward it.

The schools now teach Blackfeet language classes, she said, and classes in Blackfeet history.

Those lessons are then translated into skills that will help children "become literate in both cultures."

A lesson in crafting a traditional drum, for instance, is packed with geometry skills. A lesson in the ancient Blackfeet constellations is a way of introducing Greek mythology.

"Knowing who you are and where you come from makes you secure," Kipp said. "You know you can succeed. You're not as likely to feel intimidated; you're not wanting to be someone else."

For generations, he said, Indians were told their language was bad, their religion was bad, their cosmology was bad, their culture was bad. That message was strongest in the schools, where there were no Indian teachers, no Indian pictures on the walls, no Indian language.

"The schools told us we were stupid, ugly and bad," he said, "and after enough repetition, we started to believe it. We no longer believed we held potential."

And that, Johnson said, is a primary reason so many parents still will have nothing to do with the schools. Elders still live who remember the government boarding schools where they were beaten for speaking their language.

"It goes all the way back to the mission schools," Johnson said. "Historically, the schools took away our identity. They took our language and culture. I believe we have a moral obligation to restore that."

The trick will be finding a way to restore culture and teach basic reading and math skills while at the same time teaching to the test.

"Our kids are already behind," she said, "but now we have to teach even more curriculum in the same amount of time. Does it create a culture versus standardization situation? That is a concern. Are they asking us to choose? In some respects, I guess they are."

The makers of the law insist no one will have to make a choice between standardization and culture, and point to flexibility built into the act that allows states to custom-fit exams to regional

difference.

"It's really not in our hands," said Elaine Quesinberry, a public relations officer for the federal Department of Education. "Each state is responsible for figuring out what test works best for all the children in that state."

"Impossible," replies Linda McCulloch, Montana's superintendent of public instruction.

There is no way, McCulloch said, to craft one single test that is equally accessible to students in Missoula and in Browning. The federal Department of Education talks about giving states flexibility with regard to the test, she said, "but you don't really have any latitude in anything that matters."

She, like Kipp and others, worry that culturally based education programs will be lost in the push to teach to the test, even though culturally based education is proving to work better than anything tried so far. And the fears of assimilation through standardization, she said, are "very real."

Faced with the dilemma of how to accommodate Montana's Indian students, McCulloch first had a long sit-down with the folks at the company from which Montana is purchasing its test.

Then, she and lots of educators from around the state walked through the questions, looking for red flags.

Now, each time the results come in, they pore over the results, looking for red flags they might have missed.

And up in Browning, Johnson has created "school improvement teams" for each building, as well as a districtwide committee that focuses exclusively on getting ahead of the curve with No Child Left Behind. They're analyzing achievement test data and planning programs narrowly aimed at answering the sorts of questions that appear on the tests.

"No Child Left Behind has been my life for most of two years now," McCulloch said. "It's consuming all our time. That's the problem of putting all the focus on one method of testing."

But the fact is, McCulloch said, Indian children generally are being left behind. A "standard" Montana kid comes to school packing about 30,000 English words, she said. An Indian kid might come with 2,500 English words.

The problem, she said, is not necessarily that the schools are failing. It's that English is a second language in many of the families. It's that parents tend to be less involved in education. It's that parents have less schooling, and are more likely to be divorced. It's that competition-based testing does not translate well into a tribal culture founded on cooperation. It's that poverty is the standard.

McCulloch, who started her career teaching on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, wonders how one statewide test can hope to accurately assess what's going on in Indian education.

"Not all education happens at school," she said. "You can't tell me that 70 percent unemployment doesn't affect education, because it does."

Of course, the folks who designed and implemented No Child Left Behind have no control over such social factors.

What they do control, however, is a pretty big checkbook, some of which has been aimed at improving basic education in Indian Country.

"The act has provided some money for reading in Indian schools," McCulloch said, "and that's a very good thing."

Last September, the act also also provided about \$105 million in grants to Indian Country educators, including money for everything from early childhood development to professional training for teachers.

The money is not, however, available for use in crafting culturally sensitive tests.

"That's the real problem," Rides-At-The-Door said. "They give you more of the same old, when we know the same old isn't working. We don't need more of what's not working. We need the freedom to continue with what we know is working."

What's working, he and Johnson and Kipp said, is a creative blend of Blackfeet culture and basic reading, writing and arithmetic lessons.

"Doing that enriches us all," Johnson said. "What Browning is becoming famous for is creating the cultural background that provides the support system that helps develop a whole person. Not a standard person, a whole person."

In the meantime, however, Johnson needs to get off that "improvement" list in the next three years. Can she do it?

"We have to," she said. "Our kids have lots of talents and skills that just aren't measured by those tests. But by golly, if we have to do well on those tests, then we'll do it."

But can she do it while at the same time continuing to see overall improvement in all facets of education, including graduation rates?

"That will be tougher," she admits. "We would like to be able to continue with what we know is working. This No Child Left Behind law, it's like a thorn in your side all the time. Before it came along, we were doing a much better job than we had in generations. We can't lose that."

After all, she said, what's at stake is the future of a people who have endured generations of assault on their very identity.

"I feel very strongly about reading and literacy," Johnson said. "These kids here, their parents had to learn about Blackfeet history by reading what was written by non-Indians. I want our children to develop the skills necessary to write our own stories. We need to write our own stories."

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