

"My ancestors' work has helped me get ready for this challenge," says Casey Sovo, a Bureau of Indian Education program administrator in northern North Dakota.



'Let's get ready to work even harder' for Indigenous students

BY CASEY SOVO AS TOLD TO JILL HARRISON BERG

We all carry a level of responsibility in today's world, and mine is education. My ancestors' work has helped me get ready for this challenge. This is not the first pandemic Indigenous people have survived. It's

important for us to not lose sight of the fact that there are many people who came before us and made us who we are today. I try to always impress this upon my staff and my students. It's our responsibility to make sure we're here tomorrow and in the future.

Since September 2019, I have

served as an education program administrator supporting Bureau of Indian Education schools in northern North Dakota, near the Canadian border. I previously served in a similar role in New Mexico. I am jointly responsible for ensuring quality education for Indigenous students in

six schools on the Turtle Mountain reservation: one preschool, two K-8 schools, one K-5 school, one 6-8 school, and one 9-12 school.

There were so many times this past school year when people around me were falling apart, feeling beaten down due to COVID-19. My first commitment is to listen fully and take it all in without trying to fix it. Then, in my role as an administrator, I reflect on what I can do. I try to look at everything that is in our control and use it for our benefit. This pandemic has been challenging, but I am reminded of a saying attributed to Sir Winston Churchill: “Never let a good crisis go to waste.”

Historically, the Bureau of Indian Education — like many education departments — was focused on operating schools and less focused on quality, especially before 2001. New accountability from No Child Left Behind, though compliance-driven at first, later led to new practices, new programs, and new initiatives. For a long time, the bureau and the state Department of Public Instruction paid little attention to these schools in the region where I work or to the fact that only about 35% of students scored proficient or advanced on annual tests. There seemed to be people in the community who were happy with that.

OPPORTUNITY AND CRISIS

Within weeks of school building closings in spring 2020, it became clear to many educators that the fear and isolation experienced by students and educators would force changes to schooling in ways that will reverberate for a long time to come. Many of us were particularly concerned about students and communities of color that were already marginalized.

In my conversations with education leaders, I began asking: If change is inevitable, what can we do to ensure the change is for the better, especially for the students who haven't been well-served by schools? I wanted to learn how equity-minded education leaders are using this crisis as an opportunity to establish structures and create a culture that supports all students to get what they need to thrive.

Among these inspiring conversations were several with Casey Sovo, a member of the Comanche Nation, 20-year educator, and Bureau of Indian Education program administrator in northern North Dakota. In our discussions, he made a strong case that now is the time for growing accomplished teachers by strengthening partnerships, making space for peer-led professional learning, and other strategies. He shared why these efforts are vital for Indigenous communities and how he is encouraging them in schools on the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians reservation. These are excerpts from our conversations.



Jill Harrison Berg

— Jill Harrison Berg

This pandemic provided us with an opportunity to shake off malaise and complacency and realize something is wrong with our education system. The majority of these kids should be proficient; it's what we adults are not yet doing that prevents proficiency. We have to do a better job, so I turned to my team and said: Let's get ready to work even harder.

POSSIBILITIES THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

The pandemic has forced my school district to think outside of its boundaries. We must think about the

community, the tribe, and the region as sources of strength. We must remove longstanding barriers in order to strengthen trust.

The Belcourt School District #7, which serves the Turtle Mountain reservation, is cooperatively managed by the federal Bureau of Indian Education system and the state's Department of Public Instruction. In the past, the relationship between these agencies was cordial but not productive. As a result, it became easy for everyone to blame each other for failing to make gains or improve attendance.

When I arrived — and especially

after the pandemic began heating up — I realized we had to change this and build real partnerships. I started by collaborating with my partner on the state side, superintendent Michelle Thomas, a Chippewa educator from the Turtle Mountain reservation, who was appointed in March 2020. We agreed that our students need us to be partners and that we would share information, co-plan, and together developed trust with our community.

Building partnerships with tribal leadership was also critically important. Our schools are on Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians land, and all of our students and administrators, and about 90% of our teachers, come from the Turtle Mountain reservation. We need this community to guide our actions, especially because of the acute risks the pandemic has posed to them. Native Americans are already health compromised: We have high rates of diabetes and obesity, limited access to health care, and other risks related to living in very rural, isolated environments.

Many of our students live in multigenerational homes, so there was a risk they would increase COVID-19 exposure among elders. Elders are particularly important in our culture. It is part of our understanding of who we are as Indigenous people that when we lose an elder, we are losing language and culture that may not have been transmitted to the younger generations yet.

It was therefore essential for us to get leaders and families' input on the many decisions we had to make in responding to the pandemic. If they were going to tell us, "No face-to-face schooling," then we were going to follow that. To facilitate these conversations, we increased our monthly meetings with tribal leadership to every two to three weeks, which provided an opportunity to develop a relationship with trust. Now we're in a good spot: The community knows we care. They know we are concerned about their children's education and their safety.

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BUILDING CAPACITY COLLABORATIVELY

We also needed to build a new relationship with teachers. We framed the pandemic as an opportunity for teachers to shine. We said: We will provide you with all of the resources and support you need to do your job in this difficult environment, and we're not going to blame you when you fail. We will help you understand that failure and move through those difficulties and lift you up so you can be successful. But we can't lose this year, we can't lose this class, and we can't lose this generation of kids.

Professional learning is always important, but it was especially important this past year. I believe the best professional learning comes from within. We have a lot of knowledge in our staff. We just need to provide time for them to share it and apply it, and sometimes we have to lift up those people on staff who can do it. The pandemic provided the opportunity to do that.

In June 2020, when we told teachers that we'd be in distance learning in the fall, there was some initial resistance. To get everyone ready for the shift, we organized peer-led professional learning. In one instance, a

paraprofessional led a series on Google Classroom. His teaching partner told me, "I was brand new to Google Classroom, but I had to learn how to do it, and he was amazing! He walked me through it, helped me understand it, answered all my questions, and I felt like, after those five days, I would not fall apart when school started." Now, almost a year later, another teacher told me, "The most meaningful and impactful thing we did was the week of Google Classroom training that was led by our in-building peers."

Teachers' peer learning extended beyond our scheduled professional development days. After vaccinations were complete in February, teachers and students came to school through the hybrid model for the first time since the start of the pandemic. Teachers had a deep need to collaborate, in real time, in real space, face-to-face with their colleagues. We developed a new routine to commit a half-day Friday for planning and collaboration among teachers. This time is not for the principal's staff meetings. It is time for teachers to work together, to really puzzle through the difficulties they're having, and to look together at data to improve teaching and learning.

When teachers build capacity collaboratively, they are able to be more vulnerable, take more risks to apply the learning, and, when they hit roadblocks, they have on-site support from those peers. It is more than just buy-in. It is knowing your colleagues actually care about you as a professional and a person.

GROWING ACCOMPLISHED TEACHERS THROUGH NBPTS

Accomplished teaching is significant for our kids because they are typically two or three grade levels behind on average in any grade level. As Native Americans, we don't have widespread access to Head Start or preschool, and we live in very rural communities where there isn't a public library and there is limited access to books at home. When you think about the barriers to an

inner-city child's readiness for school, take it and multiply it times two or three.

One promising avenue for ensuring excellent, accomplished teachers is through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). Research shows having a National Board Certified Teacher for one year can lead to three additional months of growth in student learning on average in one school year. In my previous role in New Mexico, I helped establish a six-year initiative that supported 98 teachers — 71 of whom work in the Bureau of Indian Education system — to achieve NBPTS certification.

I encourage Turtle Mountain teachers, counselors, librarians, and principals to begin the certification process with me — I've started the board certification process as a candidate myself. I'm starting the first component now and will continue with the remaining three portfolio components over the next two years. In addition, I'm hopeful that some of the 65 National Board Certified Teachers in North Dakota can support us and that the Bureau-born National Board Certified Teachers who have been working with candidates in Arizona and New Mexico will be willing to provide virtual support from across state lines.

While the Bureau of Indian Education initiative is ending, the pandemic brings new incentives to continue pursuing board certification, as well as new funding through the CARES Act and the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund. The pandemic has forced us all to reconsider how we teach and what strategies and skills would be necessary to be effective. Having a National Board Certified Teacher could make all the difference in the world when it comes to equity in our district. Our academic need is way bigger and more diverse than students beyond the reservation. Who can address this better than a National Board Certified Teacher, who has already demonstrated the ability to differentiate, intervene, reflect, and engage?

MAKING DREAMS FOR THE FUTURE A REALITY

When I was ready for the possibility of a career change, I said to the creator, "Take me to a place where the district wants to work together, where schools want to be aligned." I have been given exactly what I asked for and I am where I need to be for right now: ready and able to support my principals, assistant principals, teachers, and paraprofessionals to get the professional development, support, and direction

they have been craving to improve students' learning and lives.

I want the best for our students, including the best teachers. Although the pandemic has been devastating for our community in many ways, it has also opened new windows of possibility to achieve educational excellence. It has increased the sense of urgency to make change, provided the motivation for collaboration, and created new funding streams. These put us in a position to really make a difference together over the next five years. What does this district need? Infrastructure, buildings, arts, music, science, sports, language instruction? Let's dream it so we can build it!

Our ancestors gave us bravery and courage to do the right thing and seize these opportunities. The mission statement of this district is: "Dedicated to excellence in education." It took the COVID-19 pandemic for us to actually begin to live that.

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