

To catch students before they fall through the cracks, Umatillas turn to charter schools

MISSION (AP) - Behind a locked door on the campus of the newly opened Nixyaawii Charter School on the Umatilla Indian Reservation, about a dozen teenagers have gathered for their last class of the day.

There are no teachers in the room, no adults allowed. The charter school's students - slouched low in their seats, baseball caps pulled down, sweatshirt hoods pulled up - are talking about how to behave in school, relearning kindergarten-era lessons long forgotten.

"We have to learn how to govern ourselves," said the group's de-facto leader, 20-year-old Jess Stone. "You guys are leading by example. You have to lead yourself before you lead others."

In Nixyaawii's first few difficult months, this group of students has emerged as a linchpin, helping to hold together a school on which the hopes of a reservation are resting.

Similar charter schools are cropping up throughout Indian Country, in states like California, Arizona and New Mexico. Tribal officials have pinned their hopes on the start-up schools as their best chance to reach a generation of Indian students who've dropped out or drifted through traditional public schools.

Charter schools receive public funding - including, for Nixyaawii, \$350,000 in one-time start-up money from the U.S. Department of Education - but are free from many of the rules and restrictions that apply to other public schools.

The idea is to encourage ex-

perimentation in education; such schools operate under a "charter" or contract with local school boards or state officials.

The Washington, D.C.-based Center for Education Reform, which tracks charter schools, counts at least 30 Indian charter schools in the country. Arizona has the most, with 12, followed by California with six; Indian charters have also opened in Minnesota and Michigan.

Not all of the schools have gotten great results; in Arizona, for example, a tribal charter school was recently shut down after authorities there had trouble with federal special education requirements and an audit, said Onnie Shekerjian, who sits on the Arizona State Board for charter schools.

But others have achieved solid results in just a short time. The San Diego-area Barona Indian Charter School, for example, posted big gains in student performance on standardized test scores in the 2003-2004 school year, besting the state average.

More Indian charter schools are in the planning stages in Oregon, Wyoming and in Alaska, where a coalition of Fairbanks-area non-profit groups and local tribes are planning a charter school that could open as soon as 2006.

Besides standard curriculum, the Alaska charter school would offer "hunting, harvesting, building canoes, berry-picking - all different activities to reinforce native culture," said Sharon McConnell Gillis, executive director for the Doyon

Forty-eight students showed up for the first day of class, refugees from area high schools where they had been surrounded by a sea of white faces.

Foundation, one of the groups working on the Alaska proposal.

In Oregon, a lot's riding on Nixyaawii being a success. The idea for the school had been floating among the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Reservation for more than a decade before the tribe finally made up its mind this year to seek charter status, but after that, things moved quickly.

Principal Annie Tester was brought on board in July and hired her three teachers in August, only a month before the start of school, housed in a community center. All three teachers are teaching some courses outside their credential area.

Things moved so quickly that there wasn't time to buy textbooks or new computers or arrange for hot school lunches to be delivered or start up a hoped-for community mentorship program.

There were skeptics and whisperers that the school had started so fast so it could field a basketball team, a hot commodity on a reservation that's crazy for the sport.

Still, 48 students showed up for the first day of class, refugees from area high schools where they had been surrounded by a sea of white faces.

Some come from high poverty families, and have relatives who have battled with alcoholism and drugs, Tester said; others had been tuning school out since junior high, one reason officials are hoping to eventually add seventh and eighth grades to Nixyaawii.

The students came to a school where the emphasis is on Indian culture - students learn traditional beadwork and basketry in art classes, discuss native fables in English and, instead of Spanish or German, are getting instruction in the almost-lost Indian languages spoken by their ancestors.

Teachers are trying to emphasize learning through group projects, rather than the more traditional scenario of a teacher lecturing up front, and students taking notes.

And so far, there have been some real victories.

For one thing, the school's so small that students can't slouch and hide, as they might have been able to do at a traditional public school, said Kristine Patrick, the charter school's English teacher.

Also, in October, Nixyaawii was chosen to receive a small schools grant from the Seattle-based Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; the \$137,000 will pay for teacher training and curriculum development.

And though two key players are ineligible because of grades, the Nixyaawii boys basketball team beat its first Class 1A Big Sky Conference rival, Arlington, on the road by a resounding, 63-44, score. The team comes to South Wasco County Feb. 4.

Tribe asks state to halt construction at old village site

PORT ANGELES, Wash. (AP) - The Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe is asking the state Department of Transportation to relocate a multimillion-dollar bridge repair staging area from the waterfront site of a centuries-old Indian village. Hundreds of human remains have been found at the site.

The 22.5-acre site is where the Elwha Klallam village of Tse-whit-zen stood for at least 17 centuries. It was torn down around 1920 to build a lumber mill.

Work on the bridge construction yard began in August 2003. Two weeks later, it was suspended when digging unearthed partial skeletal remains of 12 Indian adults and one infant, plus numerous artifacts.

Archeologists and tribal members have found the full remains of at least 265 Klallam forebears, almost 800 isolated skeletal parts and more than 5,000 artifacts.

Both the tribe and state archaeologists say Tse-whit-zen is the largest discovery of its type in the region.

At issue are any still-undiscovered remains. If the bridge project proceeds, they would be entombed beneath a huge concrete dock - big enough to hold four battleships the size of the USS Missouri, according to state DOT diagrams.

Tribe exempts nonprofit group from hiring preference rule

BROWNING, Mont. (AP) - Tribal leaders have agreed to exempt a Great Falls nonprofit assistance group from a reservation ordinance that gives hiring preferences to tribal workers.

The decision means workers with Opportunities Inc., will be allowed to return to the Blackfoot Indian Reservation in January to apply weather stripping, insulation and other weatherization improvements to 14 low-income homes.

Yakama Nation taking over fish hatchery from state

KLICKITAT, Wash. (AP) - In what some are calling an unprecedented move, the state plans to transfer its Klickitat fish hatchery operations to the Yakama Indian Nation in an effort to restore fish runs to the upper basin of the Klickitat River.

It's been more than 50 years since salmon and steelhead returned to spawn in the upper basin of the Klickitat, which flows some 100 miles from the base of Mount Adams to the Columbia. Before hydroelectric dams were built on the Columbia, an estimated 15,000 fish returned to the river each year.

Beginning in February, the tribe will take over management

of the fish hatchery after 50 years of state management. The state will continue to have a hand in operations.

"This is groundbreaking for us - this is way outside of what we're used to doing," said Bill Tweit, state Department of Fish and Wildlife representative. "We're usually pretty possessive of our hatcheries because we're really proud of them."

Under the transfer agreement, the state retains timber rights to the 200-acre hatchery site, located east of Glenwood in the closed section of the reservation, and the public will still have access to the area for fishing and rafting.

Allowing the tribe to restore

fish runs in the upper basin will not only improve fishing for tribal members, but for commercial fishermen and sportsmen in the lower basin as well, Tweit said.

"If we can get fish in the rivers and streams up here, then families can come up here and camp and catch fish," said Virgil Lewis, tribal council vice chairman. The hatchery has been successful in stocking the river with fish - more than 6 million are dumped each year - but salmon haven't been returning to the upper watershed.

Work is under way to improve flows through two tunnels that were carved out of the canyon walls in the early 1960s.

Umatillas and state of Washington sign agreement

SQUAXIN ISLAND, Wash. (AP) - The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation have signed an accord with Washington state, paving the way for cooperation between the two parties.

The Umatillas signed the accord last week following the annual meeting between Washington Gov. Gary Locke and the tribes, the tribes announced in a news release.

The accord was modeled after similar agreements reached

by Washington state and federally recognized tribes within the state. The agreements formalize the commitment by tribes and the state to work on a government-to-government basis.

The Nez Perce Tribe of Idaho also was a party to the new accord, the Umatillas said.

The Umatillas retain and exercise rights to resources in Washington state under an 1855 treaty. The tribes own the more than 8,400-acre Rainwater Wildlife Area south of Dayton..

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