

Oregon Superintendent of Public Instruction addresses Indian Education conference

Castillo says Native students doing better, but room remains for improvement

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

Oregon Superintendent of Public Instruction Susan Castillo praised Native American educators for the improvement of Native students in state schools on March 6 during the 33rd annual Oregon Indian Education Conference held on the Tribal campus in Grand Ronde.

Castillo, head of the state Department of Education, said that Native American students' scores have "improved considerably" in reading and math at the fifth- and eighth-grade levels over the last five years.

"They have made steady progress over time," Castillo said during her lunchtime speech.

However, she said that high school graduation rates among Native American students in Oregon have been "somewhat flat" and that the dropout rate, although better than a decade ago, is still too high.

She said Oregon Native American high school students scored 14 points over the national average in reading and five points over the national average in math when taking the SAT test.

"But only 272 (Native) students took the exam in Oregon," Castillo said about the college-prep exam. "We can do better."

"The trend is positive and you're making a difference in the lives of students you serve. We are on the right track."

The Oregon Indian Education Conference, "Walking in Two Worlds: Integrating Culture and Education," featured 30 breakout sessions on March 6 and a general assembly and business meeting on March 7. About 120 attendees stayed at Spirit Mountain Lodge and were transported to the Tribal gymnasium and Education Buildings for the conference.

Among the breakout sessions, which covered diverse educational topics affecting Native American and Alaskan Native students, was "Dig Deep: Canoe Families in Your Community" by Grand Ronde Cultural Education specialist and Tribal member Travis Mercier.

Other breakout sessions were "Language Immersions in the Grand Ronde Community" by Tribal Cultural Resources Education Coordinator Tony Johnson and "Enhancing Educational Success" by Tribal member Jackie Leno Grant, chairwoman of the Oregon Indian Coalition on Postsecondary Education.

Among other topics Castillo covered during her 30-minute speech before conference attendees was the lack of a Native American specialist within the state Department of Education.

Pat Darcy (Siletz) asked Castillo why, since Oregon Tribes have a government-to-government relationship with the state, there isn't a Native American specialist in her department.

Castillo firmly laid the blame on the state Legislature and Gov.

Ted Kulongoski for not funding the position or making it a priority.

"We need to have a fully funded position there," Castillo said. "We need a really strong, united voice" directed at state legislators and the Governor's Office to make it a reality, she said.

"We had some really good Tribal lobbyists working with us during the last legislative session," Castillo said. "They tried to help us with this. It looked like we would get it until the very end."

Castillo also commended Grand Ronde Tribal Scholarship Coordinator Luhui Whitebear (Chumash) who, along with her brother, Mt. Hood Community College freshman Che Butler (Siletz), raised the issue of Native mascots at Oregon schools.

Castillo complimented them on their "passion and persistence in tackling this issue." She said the state Department of Education was in the process of seeking more input from Oregon Tribes before it "moved ahead decisively" on the issue.

"My hope is that next year I will have definitive answers on how to move ahead," Castillo said.

Whitebear told Castillo that she was concerned about a backlash from their effort, saying that some

schools were singling out Native students and asking them their opinion on Native-themed mascots.

Castillo said that she was not aware of the backlash, and thanked Whitebear for informing her about it.

Castillo also said she supports efforts to incorporate Native American culture and history in Oregon school curriculums, citing the department's effort to promote the teaching of indigenous languages and allowing that knowledge to meet the Oregon college require-

ment for learning a second language in high school.

Castillo also encouraged conference attendees to contact their congressional representatives to fight for more Title VII (Indian Education) funding, which she said was "flat."

"If you know a personal story, tell it to them. It makes a difference and they'll fight for every dollar," Castillo said.

Before Castillo spoke, Siletz Tribal Elder Darelle "Dino" Butler delivered the conference's keynote speech. ■



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Tribal Member Chris Bailey, Youth Education high school lead, shakes hands with Susan Castillo, Oregon Department of Education's Superintendent of Public Instruction, after giving her a necklace after she spoke during the 33rd annual Oregon Indian Education Association Conference March 6 in the Tribal gymnasium.

Johnson named Indian Educator of the Year

Grand Ronde Cultural Education Coordinator Tony Johnson (Chinook) received the Indian Educator of the Year award at the 33rd annual Oregon Indian Education Association Conference held March 6-7 on the Tribal campus in Grand Ronde.

Johnson has been working for the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde since 1997.

"Ultimately, I assume I received the award for my work with the Chinuk Wawa language," Johnson said.

Johnson, 37, attended the University of Washington in Seattle and Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Wash., earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in metal smithing and a minor in anthropology. He holds an American Indian Language teaching license in the state of Oregon.

"It was absolutely shocking," Johnson said about winning the award. "It was a genuine surprise. In terms of things I've been awarded in the past, it is hugely

significant to me."

Johnson cited two influences — his father, Gary, who worked for many years in Indian education in Johnson's home community of Willapa Bay in southwestern Washington state, and Yakama Tribal Elder Virginia Beavert, a fluent speaker of the Yakama language and a role model for Johnson.

"We've been long-term friends and she has won the equivalent award in Washington," Johnson said. "I used to joke with her that I'd like to win an award like that when I'm in my 80s. ... It was truly an honor."

In addition to Johnson, Grand Ronde Scholarship Coordinator Luhui Whitebear (Chumash) was named Outstanding Volunteer of the Year.



Tony Johnson

Whitebear, 28, has been working for the Tribe for five years in May. She has a bachelor's degree in ethnic studies from Oregon State University.

Other award winners at the Indian Education Association Conference included:

- ◆ Wanda Nukusuk (Cherokee), who lives in the Coos Bay area, was named Outstanding Indian Elder of the Year.
- ◆ Sarah Meade (Coquille) was named Outstanding Indian Student of the Year.
- ◆ Cathy Russell, who works for the Lincoln County School District, was named Outstanding Administrator of the Year.
- ◆ Lillian Yasana (Klamath/Mo-doc) was named Higher Education Student of the Year.
- ◆ Among 12 2008 Pepper Memorial Student Achievement Award winners were Grand Ronde members Katherine Warren and Jessica Stryker. They received \$200 awards to continue their education. ■