

Proposed Native American curriculum termed 'ambitious'

By Brent Merrill

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After almost 30 years of sitting on the shelf, a "new" mandatory American Indian/Alaskan Native education curriculum plan could become a reality in Oregon.

Grand Ronde Tribal member April Campbell, the Tribe's former Education Department manager and now the Oregon Department of Education's Indian Education specialist, presented an updated plan to the State Board of Education in April.

The Board of Education adopted the two-year plan that will target Native American and Alaskan Native students in Oregon in an effort to improve educational results. The plan is essentially a road map to guide the state in ways to improve opportunities and outcomes for Native youth in Oregon.

Campbell spent nine months working with an advisory panel that had 29 members she put together with representatives from all nine federally recognized Tribes in Oregon. The panel members collaborated to update a plan that had been last updated in 2006 and had been on and off the radar since the late 1980s.

"What I did when I came into office was update the plan," said Campbell. "We brought together advisers throughout the state, met monthly, looked at the old plan, prioritized current affairs of Indian education here in Oregon and formed objectives."

Campbell said the process started in July 2014 and culminated in March. She said panel members listened to the needs of Indian students as they were presented and formulated a list of 11 objectives to present to the Board of Education for its approval.

The objectives outlined in the plan come with strategies and the ability to measure the outcomes of each objective.

By design, the plan is aligned with the Oregon Department of Education's strategic goals, including increasing attendance and graduation rates for Native students.

If adopted by the Legislature, the plan would guide the state in providing culturally relevant professional development for teachers, increasing recruitment and retention of Native teachers and implementing historically accurate, culturally imbedded Native curriculum and instructional materials throughout the school system.

"Leaders from the Tribal governments in Oregon and the Legislative Commission on Indian Services have identified education as a top priority for years," said Karen Quigley, executive director of the Legislative Commission on Indian Services. "LCIS has always been interested in both the work on the plan, its goals and its implementation."



April Campbell

Quigley said the Indian Services Commission will continue to be interested in the plan as it plays out at the state level.

"The goals in the plan are clearly outlined," said Quigley. "The strategies designed to achieve those goals are described specifically and the plan includes some concrete ways to check on how things are going, such as more Native teachers hired and more Native students starting and finishing schooling beyond high school."

The specific objectives revolve around the idea that every student graduates from high school and is ready for college, a career or for civic life, and that all school districts develop and implement systems of excellence. The plan calls for meaningful engagement of Elders, parents and the community to make Oregon schools among the best in the nation.

Specifically, the objectives are to increase graduation rates for Native students that will meet or exceed the statewide average of all students, increase college or career readiness to meet or exceed the statewide average of all students and to have each high school student graduate with a minimum of three college credits.

Objectives also are seeking to increase the statewide attendance average of Native students to meet or exceed the average of all students, to have school districts recruit and retain at least 5 percent Native teachers in their schools and to have all teachers and administrators and their support staff attend culturally responsive training at least once per academic year.

The plan also calls for all students who complete Oregon Native American Teacher Preparation programs at the University of Oregon and Portland State University to be recruited by Oregon schools and/or Tribes.

Outlined in the objectives are goals to have every school district in the state implement historically accurate, culturally embedded and appropriate, place-based and contemporary American Indian and Alaskan Native curriculum and instructional materials developed in collaboration with local Tribes.

The plan also calls for schools to implement culturally relevant family engagement in an effort to help Native students be as prepared as possible for higher learning.

Another objective of the plan is to accurately identify who is counted as Native, as well as establish the framework for accountability of the would-be mandatory plan.

Lastly, among the objectives is the ideal of continuing to build the capacity of the Department of Education internally by increasing staffing that will support the schools in implementing such an ambitious plan.

"So the idea is to make progress on all those objectives in the next two years," said Campbell. "It's a live, breathing plan so it's a strategic plan. We will be re-visiting it annually to see the progress we made and every two years to update it and add new objectives and new goals."

"It's a very ambitious plan, but I think it needs to be ambitious because I don't think we can wait any longer. Putting this off any longer is just not doing our students any justice."

Campbell received assistance from Education Northwest's Senior Adviser Matt Eide when revising the plan.

Education Northwest is an education nonprofit organization located in Portland that is funded by federal contracts in an effort to provide technical assistance to schools and support state education agencies.

Eide acted as the co-facilitator with Campbell on the advisory panel and he said the plan contains lofty goals.

"There was a lot of discussion around the setting of these objectives and goals," said Eide. "Ultimately, the panel decided to set ambitious and perhaps maybe even audacious goals as a way to really light a fire and bring some urgency to the issues that Native students face in the state and in the nation."

"I'm really pleased with the process and the product. By bringing this body together and helping them become cohesive and act as an advisory panel is going to pay dividends for the state and the Oregon Department of Education moving forward. It really is a strong plan."

Campbell said she is currently focused on developing more specific action plans for each of the objectives and moving forward with their implementation.

"One of the objectives in the plan is that the Oregon Department of Education would support legislation that would come forward similar to what Washington and Montana have done so that it would be a requirement," said Campbell.

Campbell said that school districts have local authority over their curriculums and that they determine what is taught in their classrooms. The state education

departments in Washington and Montana agreed with the local districts having that authority, but what they made mandatory were specific components of Native American history.

"And not just history, but contemporary knowledge," said Campbell. "That is the kind of language we have developed and that we are working to simulate here in Oregon."

In May, Washington Gov. Jay Insee signed a bill making teaching of Washington's Native American curriculum titled "Since Time Immemorial: Tribal Sovereignty" mandatory rather than encouraged.

The supporters of the bill envision Native students becoming more engaged in their own education and in essence their futures. It is now a mandatory part of school curriculums in Washington to teach students about the treaties between Tribes and the United States. Students will learn what those treaties mean and that Tribes have their own governments, jurisdictions and economies, and that Tribes have responsibilities in their historical areas because of those treaties.

Campbell sees a window of opportunity with Oregon Gov. Kate Brown in office. She intends to take advantage of that opportunity.

"This plan has been in place for nearly 30 years and there has been really little to no effort in terms of implementation so I think the atmosphere and the environment is ripe right now to make this actually have some action taken," said Campbell.

Campbell said she will be working with Tribal lobbyists who will aid in developing legislation and recruit sponsors for Oregon's version of the Washington state bill.

"We hope to go through the legislative process," said Campbell. "We were really hoping to get it into next year's short session, but it's such a quick turnaround time we'll see. If not the 2016 session, then definitely in the 2017 session."

Quigley is also eager to see the Native curriculum reach fruition as well.

"I am sure LCIS would be thrilled to get positive reports on the plan's implementation in the years ahead," said Quigley. "Most important will be real results – an ever-increasing number of Tribal members engaged in a meaningful relationship with their fellow students, educators, administrators and staff in interesting, challenging and positive lifelong learning that allows them to be the best students, Tribal members, family members, community members, employees and citizens that they can be."

Leslie Riggs, current Grand Ronde Education Department manager, said he likes the plan

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