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What Does Healthy Really Mean?

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Wellness is written into the very bones of The Native American Community Academy (NACA). The school's triumvirate mission includes integrated curriculum, cultural/language context, and a wellness philosophy. This philosophy encompasses a holistic approach to each student and considers his or her intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and community relationship wellness.

In the beginning stages of the development of NACA, principal and founder Kara Bobroff researched possible causes of the lack of educational success with urban Native youth. She noticed that the reasons were health-related, involving factors such as alcoholism, nutrition, and high rates of suicide, and to deal with this, she formed an advisory committee comprised of educators, mental health professionals, healthcare providers, and Native American traditional practitioners. This team of professionals sought answers to this question: what is impacting Native youth? "What I thought was going to happen was we were going to come up with a scope and sequence prevention curriculum," principal Bobroff remarked. "What really happened was a two-day discussion about identity and how it impacted overall wellness. At that point, it wasn't really about a curriculum to prevent diabetes or alcoholism; it was more about looking at the overall person and aspects of who they are." From there, a wellness philosophy was conceived. It was less about specific content and more about getting at what it means to be healthy, and that had to be present in every part of what was to be done at the school.

The wellness philosophy was developed using the medicine wheel, the values of which are present in many indigenous communities. Though the medicine wheel has different significance to different tribes, the common idea is the wellness of the individual considers the intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and social health of individuals and their relationship to all of life. From this medicine wheel, NACA developed a wellness wheel with similar values, and an approach to the development of wellness. There is a baseline holistic understanding that all components of the wellness wheel are connected and interrelated. For example, if the community the students live in does not have access to healthy food, this not only affects their physical health, but is connected to academic performance as well. The goal is to have each student understand not just who they are, but why they behave as they do. Therefore, there is not necessarily a prescriptive "intellectual wellness" program, because there is a constant flux and regaining balance for each individual student. Depending on what each student is experiencing, a holistic approach might at one point focus on intellectual guidance, and at others on physical recommendations, teachers might choose to have students run sprints to calm them down, or to get more blood and oxygen to the brain.

What does this wellness wheel and philosophy look like at NACA? It begins on Monday morning when all students gather for morning circle. The purpose of the morning circle is to bring in the new week with good thoughts, good words, and a good song. One of the challenges is that our urban Native students have a fragmented and undeveloped understanding of the wellness wheel. So some mornings, the circle is fragmented and students disrespect the purpose of the circle. This is indicative of a larger challenge that the whole school faces: to create common behavioral expectations that are framed from an indigenous perspective. Because we are people from various cultural backgrounds, even within a homogeneous Native community, indigenous means different things to different people. Food is one example of how this indigenous perspective can be interpreted differently. Philosophically, we all agree that government commodity foods such as sugar, white flour, and lard have been detrimental to the physical health of Native people. However, frybread and pop can be found at almost every Native Feast Day, Pow-wow, and community gathering here in the Southwest. If our goal is to support holistic wellness here at NACA, then why do we allow pop on campus? Or frybread at community events? Some teachers are adamant about not allowing any unhealthy foods or drinks in their classroom because this is their interpretation of how the

indigenous perspective gets translated, while others make different choices based on their own interpretations.

The students move from the morning circle to their classes. Some go to Mr. Silva's Personal Wellness class, a combination of physical education and health, where the focus today is on diabetes prevention. Mr. Silva believes healthy bodies create a healthy community and environment. Through good nutrition and adequate physical activity, students can be more productive in their academic and outside communities. In Mr. Silva's class, the personal wellness curriculum poses questions to problems prevalent to Native communities. For example the question asked is not "Does diabetes affect anyone in your family," but "Who in your family is affected by diabetes," with the underlying assumption that everyone is somehow affected by this disease. "I want the students to recognize the problems in their community, and how those problems affect them," Silva explains. "In return, they will develop the tools to find solutions." Fifty years ago, diabetes was virtually nonexistent in Indian populations. Now, students are being told that they are at a much higher risk and are genetically predisposed to the disease. It is imperative, then, for this generation of students to begin to think of solutions because of the drastic health impacts of generations of systemic racism.

Across campus, in Mr. John's Personal Wellness class, some students are doing yoga, also as part of a diabetes prevention curriculum. Mr. John's approach is from the inside out. Studies have shown that stresses exacerbated by institutionalized racism are correlated to the increasing rates of diabetes. Yoga is proven to lower serotonin levels, which are responsible for telling the body to store fat. Any time serotonin levels increase, people are more inclined to eat and store fat. Most Indian families in the urban community have little or no access to healthy foods, so not only are they highly stressed, but they are eating high-sugar, high-fat foods and increasing their chances of becoming diabetic. In addition to teaching them to control their own serotonin levels, yoga also reduces stress. It's also a basic form of strength training. In Mr. John's personal wellness class, curriculum focuses on the development of critical thinking skills, group skills, physical strength training, outdoor education skills, and yoga.

In the pink portable classroom marked "Wild Mind," Ms. Emily's eighth grade students are finishing reading the last scene of Romeo and Juliet. The tragedy culminates in Romeo's suicide over the supposed loss of his young wife, Juliet. "We have to spend an extensive amount of time talking about why this is a REALLY BAD IDEA, because statistics indicate the highest rates of suicide occur in Native youth, particularly young men, and specifically because of failed relationships," says Ms. Emily. Discussion includes how Romeo came to this decision, how this "fatal flaw" of the protagonist could have been avoided, how his family and friends tried to support and dissuade him. We talk about friends they know who emotionally overact like Romeo, and ways in which to support them. This is one way in which social/emotional wellness is written into the curriculum outside of a traditional classroom. Additionally, NACA's primary focus is to ensure that all of its students are college ready. Developed in collaboration with a freshman composition professor at the University of New Mexico, the focus of the eighth grade language arts curriculum is developing critical thinking skills and writing workshops in groups. Students also use individual writing time as a tool to process difficult life situations and feel through intense emotions. Students run and exercise during this language arts class as another way to sharpening critical thinking, decision making, and great writing skills.

In the afternoon, seventh grade science and language arts are co-taught by Mr. John, Ms. Emily, and Ms. Salazar. It is spring, and at NACA, that means the garden project is in full swing. The seventh graders have just finished digging seven 4-by-16 foot garden beds in the tenacious, clay-based New Mexico soil. Gardening is intricately woven into the everyday culture of many Native communities, and this project provides a wonderful opportunity for students to reconnect with that aspect of their culture. They will plant a three sisters garden (corn, beans, and squash) in Hopi waffle garden style. The three sisters has been a sustainable way of gardening in indigenous communities for hundreds of years. The nitrogen-needing corn provides a stalk for the nitrogen-providing beans to twine around and the broad-leafed squash provides shade, and therefore minimal water evaporation, in the high desert climate. Though a few initially joke about child labor laws, most love the hard work and most importantly, getting to be outside.

NACA challenges teachers to develop curriculum that is consistent with the wellness wheel. There is a specific urgency that is felt in the rising statistics about diabetes and obesity, alcoholism and suicide, as well as the decrease in Native languages being spoken. Creating appropriate curriculum to address these issues and work with the strengths of the community is more than a nod to the status quo or standards and benchmarks, it is a factor upon which the quality of students' lives depends.

NACA is a charter school that began in August 2006 with sixth and seventh grades, adding a class each year through twelfth grade. About 95 percent of NACA's students have Native American heritage. NACA is the first urban Native school in Albuquerque, a much-needed addition; 75 percent of Natives in New Mexico now live in the city rather than on the reservation. In order to maintain classes of 12 to 18 students, each grade has no more than 60 students, taught by 17 faculty members.

(goes with Wellness Wheel graphic which can be found in the magazine) Native American Community Academy Wellness Wheel NACA students use this Wellness Wheel to create their annual Personal Learning Plans. Within this format, they record their personal mission, responding to the question, "What motivates me to come to school and learn?" Students record their goals for intellectual, physical, social/emotional, and community and relationship wellness, and use those goals to guide their learning each year and throughout their time at NACA.

Native American Community Academy Mission

NACA students will grow from adolescence to adulthood while successfully completing a college preparatory curriculum, learning the importance of overall wellness and healthy life practices. NACA students will learn through diverse cultures and engage in community projects. NACA students will have access to community mentors involved in a variety of careers and cultures found in New Mexico.

Arlyn John is currently the Experiential Educator at the Native American Community Academy. Arlyn is responsible for coordinating and planning outdoor educational trips for the students at NACA. Arlyn is also co-teaching a science and language arts class. Arlyn John has been in the field of outdoor education for four years.

Emily Beenen has taught Language Arts (and co-taught Science) at The Native American Community Academy for two years. She's also been a freelance writer in Albuquerque for the past five years and helped to facilitate CES' first Wellness Workshops at the Fall Forum in Denver.

Leroy "Buster" Silva is the Personal Wellness Teacher at the Native American Community Academy. Silva also reaches out to Native communities in New Mexico, spreading the message of health and fitness to youth, adults, and elders.

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