

Niibin, A Summer Revolution

Indian families, from babies to grandparents, attend summer school together in Minneapolis.

EVA NEUBECK AND JANET WITTHUHN



Photo: Steve Premo

A small and quiet revolution in education took place last summer: families, from babies to grandparents, attended school together in a program sponsored by the Indian Education Section of the Minneapolis Public Schools. Financial cutbacks had threatened to leave much of the student population without a summer activity, and a creative response was needed. The result was a program named *Niibin*, the Ojibwe word for "It is summer." Selected as a theme for the program was the Dakota saying, "Let us walk the soft earth as friends to all that live."

American Indians make up about 2.4 percent of Minneapolis' population and about 5.8 percent of the public school enrollment. The Indian population of the city is largely Ojibwe, but there are substantial numbers of Dakotas and representatives of other tribes as well.

Statistics about American Indian students tend to be depressing. Achievement scores in math and reading are well below norms, and absenteeism is inordinately high. In the end, the number of dropouts reaches 50 percent. Indian families are more than likely to have incomes below the poverty line. Alcoholism and family violence are excessive. Unemployment runs rampant.

Yet some significant developments are occurring in the Minneapolis Indian community. An Indian-designed shopping center, Franklin Circles, opened recently in the heart of the largely Indian-populated south side. A much-used clinic serving both mental and physical needs is run by the Indian Health Board. The community is well-organized to respond to addiction problems with treatment facilities and halfway houses. A foster-care group supports parents as they try to keep Indian children in the community. *Migizhi*, an Indian radio broadcast, originates in Minneapolis. The University of Minnesota has both an Indian Studies Department and an Indian Support Services Program. Indian professionals are taking leadership roles in various occupations. And the Minneapolis Public Schools

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boast one of the few Indian Education Sections in the country. The needs of Indian students have a special place in the minds of those who plan school district services.

By 1982, special summer programs for Indian students had been offered for five years. But despite cutbacks in other summer programs that year, Indian students still got special attention. Using Title IV Indian Education Act money, the parent advisory committee approved expenditures for a six-week summer school program. The program design was left to the staff, who had to cope with limited district support services. The challenge was to offer something for as many people as possible; to do more for less. We had to determine both what the community wanted and what it needed. From past years it was clear that Ojibwe language and culture classes were demanded. Because of the lack of regular summer school offerings, it was also clear that math and reading courses were imperative. Finally, because of social problems in the Indian community, some attention was needed in the areas of mental and physical health.

Good health and successful education go hand in hand, and the two were combined in this summer program through cooperation with the Indian Health Board of Minneapolis. Staffed by highly qualified professionals, paraprofessionals, and community workers, the Indian Health Board had previously focused primarily on providing direct health care. Assessment of the Indian community led the Board to become more involved in prevention as well, and the summer school presented the perfect "captive audience."

Health needs are not just a matter of a clinic responding to a problem; they must be accepted and planned for as part of daily life. This is especially true in the Indian community, where absenteeism is high because of illness. So class by class, students and their families worked through the following topics: nutrition, dental care, introduction to the laboratory, fire safety, introduction to medical care, and poison and accidents. In addition, small-group discussion classes were offered on such topics as family communication, parents as sex educators, values and self-esteem, and chemical dependency. Whenever possible, families attended these sessions together.

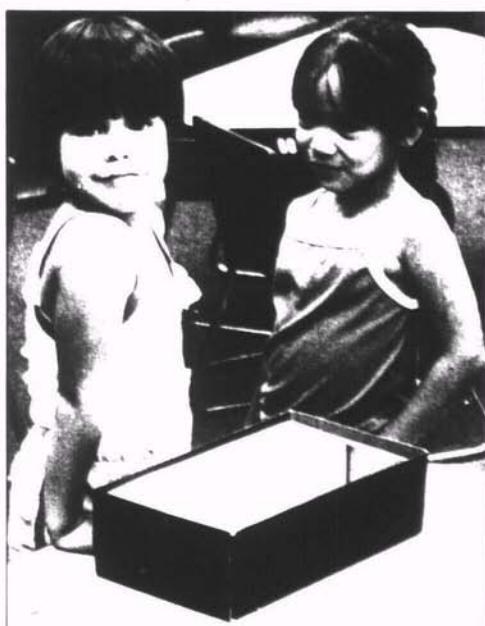
This joint venture between two large urban Indian institutions was important as a model for how organizations can stretch their limited resources by defining the specializations of each individual group, and then joining cooperatively with others to deliver comprehensive services.

The Family Comes to School

Early in the planning for *Niibin*, it became clear that it wasn't just the students who needed the services we would be offering. Children's learning, achievement, and values are nurtured at home by their families, but many Indian adults have had limited contact with the schools and feel uncomfortable dealing with them. The curriculum seems foreign to them, and the teachers are strangers. Old feelings left over from unhappy boarding school experiences have made it difficult for many parents to be advocates of education and to support their children through the educational experience.

Since families are so important, we thought, why not invite whole families to take part in the summer program together? A family, in Indian country, doesn't mean just the parents and the children, but the extended family as well. For some Indian children, it is the parents who are the primary influence in home education; for others, it is a grandparent, aunt, or uncle who bears significant care-taking responsibility. All these people were invited, and a cross section of them were involved: grandmothers, preschoolers, fathers—even a mother with her five young children, who missed only one day of summer school. One hundred eighty-nine students attended classes. So did 75 adults, representing over 50 percent of the children enrolled. And remember, the adults did not just visit during an open house or assist with homework; they actually went to school with their children.

A key factor in attracting families was the availability of free on-site day care. A certified child care teacher instructed junior high students in the skills of child care, and they in turn took care of infants and toddlers. Parents were free to leave their children in good hands and go off to class with their school-age children.



"Pre- and post- tests were given in reading, mathematics, and Ojibwe language and culture."

Photo: Steve Premo



Their day was divided into thirds. Each class rotated through a prearranged schedule and moved from room to room. Math and reading instruction took place during one block of time, native language and culture during another, and mental and physical health during the third.

Certified teachers were hired, so the program was able to give credits when they were earned. Because the teachers were from the district, they were familiar with local resources. They also knew what learning outcomes Minneapolis expected and were able to teach toward them. The teachers seemed to gain positive impressions of the students and new insights into their capabilities. In-

teraction with the families allowed the teachers to explain students' work and progress to their parents and in return gain new understanding of the struggles of Indian students. The teachers have now taken their new insights and expectations back to their regular teaching assignments, sharing them with their colleagues.

Turning Pessimism Around

In a day of cutbacks and diminished programs, the Indian Education Section and the Indian Health Board were able to provide a strong and effective summer program. Nearly the full range of human needs received attention. Unique aspects of the program included:

1. Education from infancy to elderhood
2. Breakfasts and lunches through the federal school meal program
3. Bus transportation for all
4. Math and reading instruction for all
5. Ojibwe language and culture instruction for all
6. Health and mental health classes for all
7. High school credits for those eligible
8. A cultural field trip to Mille Lacs Reservation for those who earned it through hard work and good attendance
9. A culminating feast that let participants celebrate their accomplishments together
10. Narrative report cards including recommendations for follow up
11. A racially and ethnically integrated staff.

The program was evaluated in a variety of ways. Pre- and post-tests were given in reading, mathematics, and Ojibwe language and culture. In reading, 88.8 percent of the students showed gains on the post-test. In mathematics the figure was 84.0 percent, and in Ojibwe language and culture, 96.4 percent.

Teachers used regular school district standards to assign grades to students in the summer program. In grades K-3, the pass/fail grading system was used. In grades 4-12, letter grades were assigned. Of those students in grades K-3, 86.9 percent earned a "pass" for the summer. Of those in grades 4-12, 81.3 percent earned A's or B's in reading, and 80 percent earned A's or B's in math.



Student attitudes about school and learning were assessed at the beginning and end of the summer. The results indicated that after the program the students had more positive attitudes in 12 of 15 areas, such as "learning to read better," "doing arithmetic," "getting good marks on schoolwork," "learning about Indian language," "going to school with lots of other Indian students," and "going to school with parents."

Adults in the program were given the opportunity to take the sixth-grade form of the SRA standardized achievement test at the end of the summer. This allowed them to see a standardized test and experience the feelings associated with formal test administration. It also gave them a chance to find out their own performance level in a low-risk situation. Over 80 percent of the parents scored at or above the sixth-grade level in language arts, math concepts, and math computation.

Finally, parents were surveyed at the beginning and the end of the program.

The results indicated that summer school was successful in increasing the frequency with which parents read aloud to their children, talked with their children about what they were learning in reading and math, talked with them about teachers and classmates, and helped or supervised their children's homework. In addition, over half the parents believed their own skills in reading and math had improved, as had their confidence in these areas. Interviews with parents are now under way to capture their extended impressions of the program.

Parents and students were sad to see the program come to an end and, with the staff, are already anticipating next summer. To be sure, education had a positive image for six weeks this summer in the Minneapolis Indian community. Some were initially pessimistic about parent participation, but the parents themselves proved that pessimism to be false. Perhaps that is the lesson of *Nii-bin*: parents can turn pessimism around and make education work. □

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