

## Denver & The West

### New old ways for Navajo teachers

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Janeice Tallsalt, left, and Sally Begay pore through materials Thursday at the National Archives and Records Administration offices at Lakewood's Federal Center as part of the "Middle Ground Project," a venture to engage American Indian students in history and civics. (Post / Cyrus McCrimmon)

Immersed in a sea of rich documents - including copies of Navajo land treaties, aged photographs and decades-old essays - educators meeting in Denver this week are engaging in a national experiment. They hope to change the way Navajo students learn American history.

The 29 teachers, 23 of whom are Navajo and all of whom teach children on the Navajo Nation reservation in Arizona, Utah and New Mexico, are engaged in "The Middle Ground Project," a federally funded venture based at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley.

Over five years, the \$2 million project will train 125 educators to teach history and civics in a way that is culturally relevant, first to Navajo students, and ultimately to any student, including urban at-risk kids and those in rural communities.

"Research indicates Navajo students learn better when it is culturally relevant, starting with what they're familiar with and expanding that to the national level and global," said Elvira Bitsoi Largie, a consultant and executive director of the New Mexico-based Navajo Education Technology Consortium.

They need to know about the Liberty Bell and 13 colonies, but they should know about what was happening in South Dakota with American Indians during that same period, Largie said.

Larry Shaw, director of sponsored programs at UNC, said the goal of the program is to find the "middle ground" between United States history and civics and Indian history and civics, and help educators teach it in a way that engages students.

For example, Shaw said, students learning about the Civil War should also know that the "Long Walk" - a more than 300-mile trek the Navajo made to Fort Sumner, N.M., when U.S. Col. Kit Carson forced them off their land - also happened during the 1860s.

For Indian students, the need is urgent. Nationally and in Colorado, Indian students lag far behind their white and Asian peers academically and have high dropout rates.

There are 52,000 Indians in Colorado, said Ernest House, executive secretary for the Colorado Commission of Indian Affairs. The Ute Mountain Ute and Southern Ute are the only tribes with reservation land in the state.

Several years ago, the Southern Ute opened the Ute Indian Academy because they were worried about a loss of culture and high dropout rates, said Pearl Casias, a founder of the Montessori school.

Before the school opened, students "were taught Colorado history and American history and they weren't taught anything about Ute history on the territory of Colorado," she said.

Michael Welsh, director of the Middle Ground Project, said loss of culture has been an obstacle to learning for Indian students since the late 1800s and mid-1900s, when Indian children were sent to boarding schools.

"The theory was, the quickest, cheapest way to civilize them was to move them away," Welsh said.

Today, Navajo youth on the reservation are heavily influenced by the culture of iPods, MTV, alcohol and drugs, said Denise Pete-Thomas, a sixth-grade teacher at the Ganado Unified School District in Arizona who is participating in the program.

"At middle-school age, they're really ashamed of being Navajo," she said.

Poverty is also pervasive, said R.C. Macsalka, one of the few non-Indians in the group who teaches on a Navajo reservation in New Mexico. "You have kids out there with no electricity and no running water," he said. "Access to technology isn't always available."

Teachers participating in the Middle Ground Project each received a \$1,000 stipend for the week, as well as digital cameras and recorders to record oral histories from elders, and a box of textbooks.

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