

## The Way I See It

by Dr. Dean Chavers, Albuquerque, New Mexico

### The Culture of Indian Education Copyright 2001

The culture of Indian schools needs changing. At one of the seminars I did recently, this topic came up with a vengeance. Indian people are upset at what the culture of the schools is. This is what these teachers, counselors, and principals said.

First of all, the teachers have too-low expectations. This is almost a cliché in Indian education but it is true. Teachers with new or progressive ideas either change their ideas and lower their expectations or leave. Some of them leave on their first Christmas break and never return. Most leave within one to two years, creating a huge lack of stability and continuity in Indian schools.

The expectations are so low that teachers really do not try hard enough. I realize it takes superhuman effort to buck a social trend, but we need to do that. Teachers do not give homework because students do not do it. The only teaching that happens is that which takes place in the classroom.

Indian students do not read books. In data I have collected at eight schools, students read less than one book per year each outside of the classroom. They need to be reading a book a week. The real education of anyone occurs outside the classroom. Most Indian students read no books at all outside the classroom. This is their way of passively resisting the colonial occupation that Indian schools have historically represented.

The only problem is that the schools now are the only salvation of Indian people. Everyone recognizes this fact, but few have capitalized on it. Ask any group of Indian parents, as I have done a dozen and a half times in the past 15

years, and they will tell you they want their kids to finish high school, enroll in college, and finish college.

Thus the culture of the schools is out of line with the expectations of Indian parents. Indian high schools need to be preparing every student to enroll in college. I realize that this is a shocking, controversial statement. But let's look at the facts.

According to the best data I have seen, only 17% of Indian high school graduates enroll in college. But for the US as a whole, 67% of high school graduates enroll in college. This is a huge 50% gap between the US and Indian Country. It needs to be closed.

Second, parents have the wrong attitude. I mean that in a positive way, not in a negative and accusatory way as some school people say it. I don't blame parents for this attitude. I blame the schools.

The attitude I am talking about is the one that says "I don't have anything to do with my children's education. My job is to put them on the bus. You teachers take it from there."

This is the wrong attitude because parents are the first educators of children. Parents can not delegate this responsibility to anyone else, despite what BIA and school people have been trying to push for 125 years. The schools now have all kinds of mechanisms in place to prevent parents from participating in school activities. All these barriers need to come down. (See my column about this in Sept. 1996.)

Parents are not going to beat the doors down at the school to become involved, in my opinion. If the hands-off attitude of parents is going to change, the initiative will have to come from the teachers. I would like to see every Indian parent in contact with the teachers of their children. This is one of the most important things we can do to improve Indian education. But almost no one is doing it.

So the students continue to get away with murder. If the teacher assigns homework, the kids know the parents will not know what is going on because they never talk to the teachers. So if the kid is lucky and Mom asks about his homework, all he has to say is "I don't have any," and that is the end of it.

## Along The Robeson Trail

by Dr. Stan Knick, Director, UNCP Native American Resource Center

A while back we looked into what has been called "the construction of Indian identity." In that segment we saw that ideas about who and what constitutes an Indian have very often been shaped by non-Indians. From early in the history of the United States, opposing views of "the Indian" developed: one view described an Indian as a "savage red man," while the other view saw instead a "victimized-but-noble environmentalist." It has been argued that both images are either completely incorrect or at best incomplete, and that both are simply constructs of the European worldview.

There can be little doubt that how we humans see each other (and ourselves, for that matter) is conditioned by how others see us, and by how they see themselves. A child who is raised being told that she is smart and creative will usually develop a positive image of herself. Conversely, a child who is repeatedly told that she is dumb and worthless is likely to develop a more negative self-image. Thus any child's identity could, to a certain extent, be "constructed" (influenced over time) in different ways. And so it is with whole groups of people.

Even the names we use for ourselves and others can be the products of someone else's worldview. Take the "Eskimo" for example. When French fur traders contacted Micmac and Abnaki Indians in eastern Canada, the fur traders were looking for the best furs to take back to Europe. They learned that there were other Native people living farther north who had fine animal pelts to trade. When the French asked the Micmac and Abnaki who those other people were, they were given the Algonkian word *eskimansic* (which means "they eat raw meat"). This word passed through French as *esquimaux* and into English as Eskimo. What was intended as a derogatory term became the word most often used to speak of Arctic indigenous people. Even some of their own descendants use the word Eskimo to describe themselves today (though most prefer tribal/national names, i.e.,

Inuit, Aleut, Netsilik, etc.). Other groups are called by names which are not of their own making, and which are often someone else's word for "stranger" or "enemy" (i.e., Apache, Sioux, etc.).

So it goes with the construction of Indian identity. An idea starts — based in truth or not — and then spreads, eventually becoming widely accepted as truth. Such was the case with the mistaken notion about the word "Lumbee" — the idea that it was invented in the 1950s. Someone started the idea, simply lacking knowledge of the nineteenth century references which show the word as an ancient name for the river (and probably, for the people indigenous to this area), and the notion spread. Before long this erroneous idea had become widely accepted among both Indians and non-Indians. A part of Lumbee identity had been "constructed," but it had been based on incorrect information.

The United States government has contributed in its own way (and continues to do so) to the "construction of Indian identity." The Bureau of Indian Affairs insists

that federally-unrecognized tribes document their connection to "historically known tribes" in order to gain recognized status. On the surface, this seems benign — Indian people everywhere find out about each other by asking questions such as: "Who are your people?" When Native people themselves are allowed to define their own identity, as long as it is done with historical accuracy, there doesn't seem to be a problem.

But when the government gets to decide who is an Indian and who is not, on the basis of pitifully inadequate historical records describing the Native people of the 1700s (as is the case with eastern North Carolina), then the government's construction of Indian identity is suspect. It can cause Indian tribes and nations to try to trace their ancestry to one of the known tribes, when perhaps we should all admit that many of the tribes that were originally here remain unknown because of the nature of the historical contact. This is especially true given that epidemic decimation and subsequent coalescence of tribes occurred long before sustained, face-to-face, European contact could have happened (Lawson estimated that by 1705 more than eighty percent of the Indians of this region had been wiped

out by epidemics, at a time when there had been no sustained European contact here along the Lumbee River). Thus only a few of the original tribes could possibly be "historically known."

Nevertheless, when tribes have moved through the government's bureaucracy toward federal recognition they have been compelled to document their connection to "historically known tribes." When the Lumbee submitted their petition for federal recognition, they emphasized their connection to the Cheraw. Bills introduced to grant legislative recognition to the Lumbee called for them to be named "Lumbee Tribe of Cheraw Indians" (with the exception of a more recent version). It seems that if tribes want to play in the government's identity game, they have to play by the government's rules. But by doing so, are they consenting to the construction of Indian identity by non-Indians?

This should NOT be taken to mean that the Lumbee have no legitimate claim to descent from the Cheraw. In fact, they do (as well as from other tribes). But just because no European colonist wrote down the word "Lumbee" during the seventeenth century (before epidemic decimation

and tribal coalescence caused the word to be submerged within the local Indian community), that does NOT mean that "Lumbee" (the ancient name of the river) is not an appropriate name for The People in and of itself. It is. But all the while, the fact that the government dictates which name is considered to be legitimate continues to complicate "the construction of Indian identity."

For more information, visit the Native American Resource Center in historic Old Main Building, on the campus of The University of North Carolina at Pembroke.

### Birthdays from Pembroke First Baptist Church

**December Birthdays:**  
Brannagan R. Locklear, December 8; Kelsey Rae Elk, December 12; Zachary Maynor, December 27 and Kristina Graham, December 31.

**January Birthdays**  
Pauline Thomas, January 1; Courtney Clark, January 1; Roderick Oxendine, January 5; Brianna Chavis, January 13; Dawson Brooks, January 14; Vicki Bell, January 18; Stephen Trevor Hunt, January 23; Carl Clark, January 24; and Delsea Thomas, January 25.

Congratulations to Billie Jo and Brannagan Locklear on the birth of a son, Brannagan Kai Locklear who weighed 8 lb 11 oz, born January 1, 2001. He was born on his great-grandmother's birthday, Mrs. Lucratie Locklear. Happy Birthday.

When the teacher asks about the homework the next day, the student simply says "I don't do it," and the teacher has no alternative. The homework is simply neglected.

Third, superintendents and principals too willingly accept the status quo. They need to set priorities. Two of them that need addressing are daily attendance and high school completion.

No one expects Indian students to attend school on a daily basis. So we have schools that have daily attendance of 65% to 75%. This is way too low. It needs to be 92% or higher for high schools, and 95% or so for elementary schools. Attendance is one of the most important factors in educational success. It is being violated on a wide scale in Indian Country.

Several schools have already proved that daily attendance can be fixed immediately. All the principal or the superintendent has to do is assign the responsibility for truancy to someone. If a student is not present for school in the morning, the truancy officer simply goes to the student's house and brings him to school, provided the student is not sick.

Supt. Reid Riedlinger did this at Wellpoint in 1990. The person responsible, Terr Wynecoop, raised daily attendance from 65% to 95% in less than 30 days. They have maintained it at this level for ten years now. Many other improvements have happened at the school since, all made possible by the adequate daily attendance.

Wellpoint has improved test scores from below the 20th percentile to above the 40th for all subjects in all areas. The dropout rate is near zero. College attendance is above 60% every year. A handful of other exemplary schools have done the same types of things.

Fourth, the schools do not prepare students for the reality of the world. In my lifetime, the culture of the US has changed radically. When I started farming in 1952, 15% of the population were farmers. Now only 1.5% of the population are farmers. Many blue collar occupations are not growing, are stagnant, or are actually losing jobs — plumbing, welding, carpentry, and many others.

What do people do in the US now? I call it KIT, which is short for Knowledge, Information, and Technology. People produce new knowledge, they pass it along, and they do so with high-tech machines. The BIA or public school on a reservation that is training its students for blue collar occupations is cheating the students in a serious way.

That is not reality. The reality is that 60-80% of jobs today involve information processing.

Teachers, fund raisers, engineers, social workers, business managers, salesmen, computer people, secretaries, and a host of others are involved in processing information.

More and more of these jobs require a college degree to get hired. In 1950 a high school education would get a person hired. In 1980 it took two years of college in many areas of the country and in many professions to get hired. Today it takes a college degree to get hired in many fields. The stakes have really gone up.

So anyone who tells an Indian high school student not to go to college is doing that student great harm. Yet I met with a group of high school seniors last week who had been told by teachers, principals, and counselors not to attend college. This is extremely bad advice, and should be ignored. Unfortunately, Indian students who are isolated in reservation schools often have little in their experience to counter such bad and ignorant advice.

The culture of our Indian schools needs to be changed, folks. That's all there is to it. There are not other alternatives. Indian students need to be fully prepared in high school for college study. They need to take all the math, science, English, foreign languages, computer literacy, writing, history, literature, and government classes they need to get into college.

They need to attend summer camps on college campuses to get them ready to deal with the foreign world of

the college experience. They need to set career goals for themselves early in their high school career, then set out to meet these goals.

My organization, Catching the Dream, has helped 268 Indian students to finish college. All of them are working. The demand for them is ten higher than the supply.

Every college wants Indian students. Every major employer wants these graduates — Ford, General Motors, General Mills, General Foods, IBM, Lockheed, Boeing, the FBI, the EPA, and hundreds of other businesses and government agencies want them.

Let's transfer the culture of our schools to today's reality.

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